
**GOING HIGHER, GOING FURTHER?
STUDENT PERSPECTIVES
ON HIGHER EDUCATION AT
FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES IN ENGLAND**

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ABSTRACT

Post-compulsory education in England is divided into two sectors: one for higher education (HE) and one for further education (FE). Although they mostly function separately, there is an overlap between the two in terms of HE provision. Currently around eight per cent (159,000) of HE students in England are taught at FE colleges (Association of Colleges, 2016) and approximately 14 per cent (22,060) of these students are pursuing a bachelor's degree (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). To offer bachelor's degrees, FE colleges must partner with universities to validate their qualifications. Consequently, college graduates enter the labour market with university-validated degrees. However, very little is known about how college students' journeys through HE compare with those of their university counterparts.

This study used semi-structured interviews (N=30) and a questionnaire (N=78) to explore how the decisions, experiences, post-graduation expectations and employment or further study outcomes of business undergraduates at English universities compare with those at English FE colleges. In particular, this research focused on students from six institutions (four FE colleges and two universities) across Yorkshire and Humberside and the West Midlands who were in the final year of bachelor's degrees in business-related subjects in 2013.

The differences between these two groups of students emerged throughout their HE journeys. Whereas university students portrayed their pursuit of HE as inevitable, college students (depending upon their age) described making an active choice to go to HE, being directed towards it or drifting into it. When selecting an institution, most university students made a choice based on preferences, while college students made one based on constraints. Their student experiences were largely shaped by the particular environment of their type of institution, meaning college students often faced tension between HE and FE that did not feature in the university student experience. This tension permeated every aspect of the college student experience, from the style of teaching to the facilities and services available at their institution. Although college students appeared to have slightly more realistic post-graduation expectations (especially in terms of salary), university students tended to have more positive outcomes, largely due to the fact that they completed work placements during their course which led to full-time jobs after they graduated.

The data from this study were analysed using the concepts of the 'figured world' (Holland et al., 1998), boundaries, identity and culture. In so doing, it becomes clear that despite the fact that these two groups of students undertook similar qualifications in similar subject areas, they did not achieve similar outcomes. As a consequence, it is argued that although HE in FE does widen participation in terms of offering more students the chance to pursue HE, it does not necessarily grant access to the same types of post-graduation opportunities.

In honour and memory of Professor Sir David Watson

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BERA: British Educational Research Association
BIS: Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
DLHE: Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (survey)
FE: Further education
FEC(s): Further education college(s)
FEFC: Further Education Funding Council (for England)
FEI(s): Further education institution(s)
FPEs: Full-person equivalents
HE: Higher education
HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI(s): Higher education institutions
HE in FE: Higher education in further education institutions
HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency
HNC(s): Higher National Certificate(s)
HND(s): Higher National Diploma(s)
KIS: Key Information Sets
LSC: Learning and Skills Council
NSS: National Student Survey
QAA: Quality Assurance Agency (for Higher Education)
SFA: Skills Funding Agency
UCAS: Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
VET: Vocational Education and Training

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The ‘enormous gulf’ between FE and HE in England

While those educated in England might see it as obvious, ‘what strikes an outsider [about English post-compulsory education]—perhaps an American especially—is the enormous gulf that exists between further and higher education’ (Trow, 1987: 219) in this country. Despite the fact that nearly thirty years have passed since Trow employed this metaphor to describe the almost tangible distance between further and higher education, the gulf he identified remains largely intact. Although this two-sector structure is not unique compared to the way many countries organise post-compulsory education (Moodie, 2008), its influence on the culture of institutions and identity of individuals in each sector in England is remarkable. Indeed, it is arguably the influence of the gulf, rather than solely its existence, which warrants the attention of insiders and outsiders alike.

Examining the historical origins and subsequent development of the institutions in each sector begins to shed some light on why such a divide exists and remains so powerful. Following their emergence during the Industrial Revolution, English further education institutions (FEIs) provided part-time education in subjects relevant to the interests of individuals in their local communities. At the same point in history, universities were attended primarily by the elite in society who wished to pursue a specific occupation, such as ‘a higher civil servant, barrister, Anglican clergyman, consultant physician, or teacher in a public or a “good” grammar school’ (Stevens, 2004: 15). While FE providers offered the training needed in the labour force, the future leaders of society attended universities (Lowe, 2002: 78-79). Therefore, different

approaches to education for distinctive groups of students defined these two types of institution. Additionally, as a consequence of their origins, they were believed to uphold different levels of educational standards (Trow, 1987; West, 2006).¹

This separation between the two, with one group of institutions (what are now known as further education colleges, henceforth FECs²) focused on vocational or ‘further’ education (FE)³ and the other group (universities) focused on academic or ‘higher’ education (HE) contributed to ‘perceptions of a hierarchy of knowledge’ because it was clear that a ‘certain’ type of education led to a ‘certain’ type of job (Lowe, 2002: 79); a perceived division which persists. As Moodie (2008: 2) explains:

[t]he more prominent sector is higher education, which comprises programmes that typically require a minimum of 3 years’ full-time study after the final year of secondary schooling, are theoretically based and either provide access to high-status occupations or prepare students for research in basic disciplines...[v]ocational education comprises programmes that typically require no longer than 2 years’ equivalent full-time study, are practical and either provide access to middle-status occupations or prepare students for higher education.

Although colleges in England have a history of offering some HE courses, this aspect of their provision ‘remain[s] a relatively hidden part of the history of higher education in England’ (Parry, 2016). Furthermore, perhaps partially

¹ Chapter 2 further explores the development of FE institutions alongside universities in England.

² The terms further education colleges, FECs, FE colleges, colleges, further education institutions, FEIs and FE institutions are used interchangeably here. In other contexts, the term FECs might refer specifically to *general* further education colleges and not *all* further education institutions. Strictly speaking, the term ‘further education institutions’ is typically used when discussing *all* of the institutions in the FE sector, including general FECs, sixth-form colleges, specialist colleges and other training providers. When one term must be used over another for a specific purpose, its usage is made explicit.

³ In England, vocational education and further education are related, but they are not exactly the same. Both terms are used here to distinguish between the vocational orientation of qualifications at FE colleges compared with the academic orientation of courses at universities. Despite a history rooted in providing vocational education, FE as a sector encompasses much more and, in some cases, ‘has been [and is] used as a shorthand for all post-school providers, excluding the universities’ (Parry, 2015: 495-496).

because their longstanding experience of HE provision is not widely remembered or acknowledged, they have ‘yet to be regarded as normal or necessary locations for higher education’ (Parry et al., 2008). However, despite their existence in separate sectors, approximately eight per cent (159,000)⁴ of the HE students in England are taught not at universities, the ‘traditional’ providers of HE, but at FEIs (Association of Colleges, 2016). This HE provision, which takes place within the overlap between the HE and FE sectors in England, is called HE in FE.⁵ The students within it, who are the focus of this research, are those pursuing HE qualifications at FE institutions.

With one foot planted in the HE sector (through their qualification) and the other in the FE sector (through their institution), the space occupied by HE in FE students differs markedly from HE students at universities (who are pursuing HE qualifications at HE institutions, henceforth HEIs⁶), particularly at the bachelor’s degree level.⁷ Unlike other HE qualifications, there is a longstanding belief in England that the first degree

wherever offered and awarded, should be of high and roughly common value. In this respect the British first degree is, so to speak, still on the gold standard. This is something in which most educated Britons take pride; and indeed, there is, it seems, a constant anxiety that perhaps the value of the degree is not what it was or what it should be, and that the quality of teaching, or the nature of the curriculum, or the abilities of students or of staff, or of the resources available to the universities, have changed in ways that threaten the quality and value of that degree (Trow, 1987: 274).

⁴ It is extremely difficult to obtain an exact figure for the number of HE in FE students at any given time (Parry et al., 2012: 62 explain in detail the reasons why calculating this figure can be problematic). At the time of writing, the most up to date figure available is 159,000 (according to the Association of Colleges, 2016 using data from the 2015/16 academic year).

⁵ Elsewhere, the terms FE-based HE or college-based HE are sometimes used instead of HE in FE. The opposite type of provision, FE in HE or university-based FE, also exists but will not be dealt with here.

⁶ The terms universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) are used interchangeably here.

⁷ Chapter 7 describes the influence this positioning can have on the college student experience.

Despite an on-going concern about ‘maintain[ing] confidence in degree standards’ (Higher Education Funding Council for England, henceforth HEFCE, 2015c), relatively little is known about how bachelor’s degree provision at colleges compares with what is offered at universities, especially from the student perspective.

In order to contribute to this area of knowledge, this thesis focuses on the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of a sample of students (including 30 interviewees and 78 questionnaire participants)⁸ who were in the final year of a bachelor’s degrees in business at six HE providers (four FE colleges and two universities across two regions of England) in the 2012/2013 academic year. By exploring these two types of HE provision from the bachelor’s student perspective, this research provides an important view on why some HE students choose to go to college (instead of university) for their bachelor’s degree, what their student experience is like, the influence of college-based provision on their expectations and what they do after graduation. Furthermore, in comparing these factors across students from both colleges and universities, this study explores how, if at all, the differences perceived to exist between FE and HE manifest themselves in the experiences of bachelor’s degree students at colleges and universities in England. In so doing, the student perspective is used as a lens to investigate a policy context in which widening participation in HE (in part through increasing the number of HE providers) is believed to directly contribute to social mobility (BIS, 2015: 7) for higher numbers of graduates.

⁸ Section 5.1.4 describes the participants in more detail.

1.2 The case for conducting this research

As both a field of research and policy area, HE in FE remains a relatively new phenomenon compared with its separate components. While some form of HE in FE existed in England as early as the 1950s, and potentially even earlier (Parry et al., 2012: 10), the largest and most comprehensive empirical study to date on this topic was published in 2012 (ibid.).⁹ Similarly, although there is evidence as early as 1956 of HE in England expanding to incorporate what were traditionally FE institutions (Scott, 2009: 404), this policy wave is fairly recent compared with the first instances of national policy focused on FE or HE. Combining this newness of HE in FE with its perceived status relative to HE in universities, it is unsurprising that '[t]he literature on higher education in FECs in England is small and the number of published research and evaluation studies is few' (Parry et al., 2012: 28).

Notwithstanding this gap in knowledge, in the 2011 White Paper entitled *Students at the heart of the system*, the British government encouraged the growth of HE in FE to support its plan for 'developing a more responsive HE sector in which funding follows the decisions of learners' (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, henceforth BIS, 2011: 8). Within the market-based HE system promoted therein, FECs would exist as one of many HE options for students, thus diversifying the system while also expanding provision, thereby allowing for increasing access and widening participation. The government recently reiterated its intention for HE provision to be 'increasingly driven by student choice' in the 2015 Green Paper entitled *Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*

⁹ Chapter 2 reviews the findings from this and other empirical studies in more detail.

(BIS, 2015: 54, see paragraph 2). Therefore, this ambition has not diminished despite a change of government.¹⁰

While the goals of this proposed development are worthy, it is disconcerting that both papers encourage development in an area about which so little is known. In addition to the lack of knowledge about HE in FE generally, very little is understood about exactly *how* the student experience compares between students pursuing HE at universities versus those at colleges. Parry et al. (2012: 104) explicitly refer to this gap in their literature review:

very little research has been conducted on the experiences of higher education students in further education, and those that have are somewhat limited in their scope. Nor, to the best of our knowledge, has research been undertaken which directly compares the experiences of higher education students studying in further education colleges with those studying in higher education institutions. Neither can this study, which focused exclusively on college students.

With this context in mind, there are clearly multiple missing links in our knowledge about HE in FE in England. However, if students are to be the driving force behind shaping the future of English HE, understanding the factors influencing their decisions and how those decisions affect their experiences as students, their expectations and their outcomes is essential information for HE providers and policymakers. Furthermore, from the student's perspective, knowing whether their investment of time and money is likely to result in receiving the student experience they want and/or in their post-graduation expectations being met could help them make more informed decisions about whether and where they pursue HE, and better understand how this choice could affect their future.

¹⁰ Chapter 10 considers the implications of this study's findings for the policy ambitions promoted in these papers.

Against this background, the research questions for this largely exploratory study are as follows:

1. What factors influence students' decisions about where to pursue HE (i.e. at an FE college or university)?
2. How does the HE student experience compare between FE colleges and universities?
3. Are the post-graduation outcomes of HE in FE graduates different from university graduates? If so, in what ways are they different?
4. How do the post-graduation outcomes of HE graduates six months after graduation compare with their expectations?

In directly comparing the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of HE in FE students with those from universities, this research aims to investigate the extent to which the institutional location of HE makes a difference *to* and *for* the students pursuing it. Without knowing how students in these two separate types of institutions compare, it is impossible to fully comprehend whether 'student choice has become a key driver of change' in the future of HE provision in England (BIS, 2015: 11).

1.3 Overview of chapters

The remainder of this thesis is divided into nine chapters. Following on from the context provided above, Chapter 2 outlines the historical and political background of HE in FE beginning with the establishment of England's first FE institutions during the Industrial Revolution. In particular, it describes the development and growth of FE alongside HE throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, highlighting some of the key policy changes that contributed to the expansion of HE in FE in England. Chapter 3 builds on this foundation by outlining some of the key challenges encountered when seeking

to understand and research HE in FE. Following this discussion, it delves into the literature available about HE in FE bachelor's students and, more specifically, their HE decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes.

Against the background given in the first three chapters, the remaining six focus on the methodology and findings from this study. The methodology section is divided into two chapters. The first one, Chapter 4, describes the research design and rationale. It starts with an overview of the research design and the study's conceptual framework, which brings together the concepts of the 'figured world' (Holland et al., 1998), boundaries, culture and identity. Next, the chapter explains the decision-making process behind selecting the particular research methods used, which is followed by a discussion of reliability, validity, generalisability, ethics and positionality. It closes by describing the expert interviews conducted prior to fieldwork, how the target sample for the study was selected and the development of the research instruments. Chapter 5 then focuses on the fieldwork and data analysis. More specifically, this chapter explains the process of recruiting participants, conducting student interviews and administering a student questionnaire. This chapter also describes how the data were analysed, and in particular the development of the coding framework.

The findings are divided into Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Chapter 6 focuses on factors influencing students' decisions about whether and where to pursue HE, such as age and work experience. Chapter 7, related to students' experiences of HE, includes sections about the tension of being an HE student within an FE environment (as compared with being one in a university environment), balancing an HE workload alongside other commitments and the support

available to college students at their institutions. Finally, Chapter 8 explores how students' expectations compare with their eventual outcomes, including topics such as graduate schemes, work placements, salaries and post-graduation reflections.

Following the presentation of all the data, Chapter 9 discusses the findings comprehensively, linking findings from all three of the previous chapters to the conceptual framework and describing the implications of the findings for HE in FE policy and practice. Chapter 10 then summarises this study's key contributions, as well as some of its limitations, before making recommendations for future research. At the end of the thesis, there is also a set of appendices (included in Chapter 12) comprising documentation related to the planning and carrying out of the study, including consent forms, participant information sheets, interview schedules and a copy of the questionnaire. The coding frameworks used for data analysis are also included.

2 AN OVERVIEW OF HE IN FE HISTORY AND POLICY

The literature review is presented in two chapters: the first focuses on historical and policy-based literature, while the second concentrates on empirical and practice-based literature. Together, these chapters cover literature on HE in FE history; HE in FE policy; student decision-making about HE in FE; student experiences of HE in FE; students' post-graduation expectations; and graduates' outcomes. Although many other areas of literature contributed to this study's contextualisation and conceptualisation, these areas are the most central to the crux of this research.

Due to the substantial influence of HE and FE history and policy on students' HE journeys, these literature areas serve as the foundation upon which the rest of the review is built. Other areas (students' decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes) are directly linked to the study's research questions. The literature explored in these areas is primarily about HE in FE students pursuing bachelor's degrees, although some literature about university students and students pursuing other HE in FE qualifications (e.g. foundation degrees) is also reviewed. The bulk of the research included is about the English HE system and was published after 1997, the year of the Dearing Report. This year serves as the cut-off point because of its significance within the history of HE in FE, which will be discussed further in 2.4. Any literature published after December 2015 has not been reviewed comprehensively, although some sources published after this date have been consulted and are referenced.

2.1 The origins of further education in England

The first technical education establishments in England, the ancestors of modern FE colleges (Walker, 2015), emerged during the Industrial Revolution (Hillier, 2006: 21). Due to the significant growth of factories in the late eighteenth century, contemporary workers needed to learn the technical skills required to operate machinery (Bristow, 1976: 131). This necessity combined with the workers' desire to understand 'the principles underlying workshop practice' led to a strong demand for technical education and the development of Mechanics' Institutes (Bristow, 1976: 132).¹¹ The first British Mechanics' Institute was founded in Glasgow in July of 1823, followed closely by one in London in November that year (Kato, 2006: 1-4). After the institute in London officially opened in February 1824, 'Mechanics' Institutes spread like wildfire everywhere' (Kato, 2006: 4) and emerged across the country, often near industrial cities, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Although their roots were in technical education, the ultimate remit of these institutions proved to be much broader. In general, they aimed 'to further adult¹² and technical education in Britain' (Claeys, 2000: 157) by providing social activities, exhibitions and lectures, some related to work and others for general interest, for adults outside of working hours.¹³ Kato (2006: 5) describes the wide range of activities offered, which

¹¹ Other organisations with similar aims also arose during the same period (Hillier, 2006: 21).

¹² Adult education in England developed alongside technical education; consequently, the early history of the two can be difficult to separate (Bristow, 1976: 132). Their separate histories are not dealt with in detail here.

¹³ In order to accommodate their members, many of the Mechanics' Institutes' events took place in the evening, leading to the strong association between technical education and 'night school' (Bristow, 1976: 2).

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included holding exhibitions, conducting excursions, and giving *soirees* or coffee parties. In the course of such activities were inserted interesting experiments and lectures on physics and chemistry. Of them all, exhibitions achieved the most brilliant success. The institutes brought together in the exhibition for public display, models and drawings which illustrated natural sciences, art crafts, specimens of natural history, models of new machines, and other things demonstrating the results of the new industrial technology. They put on scientific demonstrations and offered lectures. In addition, they gave concerts and provided food and drink.

Within a society 'with clearly defined class boundaries, where the existing universities remained the preserve of the privileged' (Lowe, 1983: 44), the education offered by these institutes was particularly significant for the working class. As Bristow (1976: 132) explains, 'what attracted thousands of working men [to join the institutes] was simply the opportunity for self-improvement'. Interestingly, though, Mechanics' Institutes also attracted members from all social classes. At a point when 'there was no national system of education' (Bristow, 1976: 133) in England,¹⁴ a local institute could serve as both a cultural hub and a melting pot for any and all members of its surrounding community. Indeed, this sense of connection to the local community remains a defining characteristic of the spirit of FE institutions in the twenty-first century.¹⁵

Although the Mechanics' Institutes saw significant growth until 1850,¹⁶ their numbers subsequently declined. According to Katoh (2006: 5), '[l]ack of funds, lack of capable teachers, lack of managing experience, and lack of basic

¹⁴ Attending school was not mandatory until after the 1870 Education Act, which 'empowered School Boards to make attendance compulsory within their areas' (Dent, 1969: 21) if so desired.

¹⁵ As just one example of this link between colleges and communities, see the 2011 report entitled *A dynamic nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities* (Sharp, 2011).

¹⁶ Bristow (1976: 132) claims that as of '1850, there were well over six hundred Institutes with a membership of over half a million' (Bristow, 1976: 132). Stevens (2004: 10) corroborates these figures, stating that 'by 1850 there were 600,000 members of the 622 mechanics' institutions'.

knowledge on the part of learners—all of these hindered [further] development'. However, just as the Institutes began to dissolve, a combination of industrial progress and international competition led to an increased demand for technical education. More to the point,

there was a growing realisation that a country dependent upon the skills of its workforce in an increasingly competitive age could no longer tolerate a so-called educational system in which most working people received little or no schooling, and which left technical education to voluntary effort (Bristow, 1976: 135).

In particular, England's poor representation relative to other countries at international exhibitions in 1851 and 1867 sparked the fear 'that England herself, at the high noon of her industrial supremacy and sophistication, might well lose this position unless she established an underpinning of education' (ibid.). Alongside these economic reasons for enhancing English education, a growing number of students attending secondary school¹⁷ also led to a rising demand for post-school education more generally. Although the post-compulsory 'system' remained relatively limited, it began to change in response to demand from industry and society.

2.2 The expansion of HE and FE until 1944

As of 1860, England had only four universities: Oxford, Cambridge, Durham (modelled on Oxford) and London. While Oxbridge upheld 'the ideal of a liberal rather than a vocationally-oriented curriculum' and 'a collegiate system fulfilling a strong pastoral role' (Lowe, 1983: 39), London, and to some extent Durham, were 'of a far more radical disposition' (Stevens, 2004: 9).

¹⁷ To provide a sense of this growth, approximately 37,000 students attended grammar schools in 1861 (Lowe, 1983: 38). Seventy years later, over eleven times as many students (433,517 in 1931) were in 'recognized secondary schools' (ibid.).

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Unlike the exclusivity of receiving an Oxbridge education within the walls of those institutions, the University of London (which included two founding colleges—University College London and King’s College; University of London, 2016) ‘was geared to providing external degrees, open to both men and women’ (Stevens, 2004: 9).¹⁸ This arrangement also meant that new university colleges, or ‘provincial universities’, which were ‘designed for local students[,]...willing to teach subjects which included the vocational’ (ibid.), could award London degrees. During the same period, the growth of industrial towns resulted in urbanisation, which led to the development of civic universities (Lowe, 1983: 37-43). These concurrent developments meant that by the early twentieth century, the number of universities in England had ‘more than doubled’ (Whyte, 2015: 128).

At the same time, technical education was also growing. According to one account, ‘the period 1850-1890 saw, both in London and the provinces, a swift, if uncoordinated, expansion of technical education in other forms, at differing levels, and under various auspices’ (Bristow, 1976: 135). In fact, many of what later became technical colleges and universities emerged from ‘the new county and county borough councils simply [taking] over the work and premises of the [Mechanics’] Institutes’ (Bristow, 1976: 137-138) after their demise. Nevertheless, it was not until the late nineteenth century that these councils, or

¹⁸ The University of London (2016) states that ‘[i]n 1858, the University opened its degrees to any (male) student, regardless of their location’. Twenty years, later ‘London became the first university in the UK to admit women to its degrees’ (ibid.). When it first began offering external degrees, the University served only ‘as an examining body for its Colleges and other “approved institutions”’ (ibid.). However, following the University of London Act in 1898, the University maintained oversight over ‘course content and academic quality in the Colleges through centrally-located faculties and Boards of Studies’ (ibid.).

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indeed any other government-linked body, were given any official power over technical education.

In 1889, the Technical Instruction Act ‘empowered the recently formed county councils to raise a penny rate to promote “technical and manual instruction” by founding schools and making grants to existing bodies’ (Bristow, 1976: 138). According to Bristow (*ibid.*), this public spending ‘on technical education, exercised by the Technical Instruction Committee, marks the beginning of local as opposed to national responsibility for FE’. In contrast, by the early twentieth century, ‘[m]odest grants from central government had become the norm’ (Stevens, 2004: 12) for university funding. Consequently, a distinct divide emerged between locally funded FE and nationally funded HE.

With more general interest in post-school education and more students available to go, significant growth followed across all institutions, including the older universities, the new universities, technical education institutions and teacher training providers. By 1931, students at technical education institutions significantly outnumbered those in all other post-compulsory categories in England, accounting for nearly 95 per cent of over one million students in post-school education (Lowe, 1983: 52). Despite being large in terms of student numbers, technical education remained mostly ad hoc and part-time, a stark contrast to the considerably more established and full-time provision offered at both the old and new universities.

Notwithstanding this growth, post-school education was still considered unnecessary for the majority of the population until after the Education Act of 1944 (Great Britain, 1944), which is considered ‘a landmark in the history of further education’ (Cantor and Roberts, 1972: 2). The changes recommended

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therein grew out of ‘a widespread and clamant demand for radical reform of the English educational system’ that emerged during the first few years of the Second World War (Dent, 1969: 29-30). Although the exact reasons for this rise in demand have been called ‘exceedingly complex’ (ibid.), Parry (2016: 88) argues that the country’s

experience of war had exposed serious deficiencies in the quantity and quality of education in general, and technical education in particular.¹⁹ This and a failure to secure the application of science to industry were widely seen as threats to the future of the country as a leading industrial nation.

After an extensive consultation process, the Education Act of 1944 (also known as the Butler Act) proposed the following changes (among others), which radically altered the structure of education in England (and Wales):

- A tripartite public system of education, consisting of primary, secondary and further education;
- Raising the school-leaving age to fifteen;
- Providing the foundation ‘for the financial support of students (both through fees and maintenance) at universities’ (Stevens, 2004: 13-14).

The most relevant change to mention here, though, is that the Act gave local education authorities the responsibility of providing further education for their communities. Though, at the time, ‘this part of the [education] landscape was better known as technical education’ (Parry, 2016: 87), the Act defined ‘further education’ as

- (a) full-time and part-time education for persons over compulsory school age; and
- (b) leisure-time occupation, in such organized (sic) cultural training and recreative (sic) activities as are suited to their requirements, for any persons over compulsory school age who are able and

¹⁹ Bristow (1976: 141) makes the point that ‘war focuses attention on education and triggers off advances’, which he claims led to both the Education Act of 1918 and the Education Act of 1944.

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willing to profit by the facilities provided for that purpose' (Great Britain, 1944: 33).

This two-part definition meant that 'further education' encompassed both technical education as well as adult education, which had mostly been separate initiatives up to this point (Hillier, 2006: 22). As a consequence, further education became a term which could be used to refer to a substantial amount of the post-compulsory education provision offered outside of the universities.²⁰

Nevertheless, not all FE was considered to be at the same level: until the 1980s, FE courses were 'styled' as either 'advanced'²¹ or 'non-advanced' (Parry, 2016: 87). Though simplistic in nature, this distinction was not trivial: the balance of advanced and non-advanced courses within particular FE institutions would be used in later decades to justify decisions such as which institutions received the greatest proportions of HE funding (Parry, 2003: 317). Advanced and non-advanced FE also became the predecessors of the terms 'prescribed' HE (those HE courses which can be funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, or HEFCE) and 'non-prescribed' HE (those HE courses which are funded by another body, such as the Skills Funding Agency, or SFA) (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 4; HEFCE, 2015b). Consequently, the proportion of advanced, and particular full-time advanced, provision

²⁰ Writing in 1972, Cantor and Roberts (1972: 286) claimed that 'until quite recently, [further education] was virtually synonymous with "technical education", consisting almost entirely of vocational training mainly in science and technology. The truth is that further education has outgrown its narrow technical confines'. Over forty years later, Parry (2015: 495) also pointed to the ongoing 'lexical confusion induced by the word "further"'.

²¹ Advanced FE described 'anything above A-level' (Hillier, 2006: 23).

offered by a particular institution would come to define their position in institutional hierarchies for years to come.²²

In the same year as the Butler Act, but before its publication, a separate committee led 'by Lord Eustace Percy...was asked to advise on the needs of "higher technological education" in England and Wales, especially the respective contributions of the universities and the technical colleges' (Parry, 2016: 88). In contrast to Butler, 'which made no reference to higher education as such', the report published by the Percy committee (Ministry of Education, 1945) 'raised fundamental issues about the development of higher education' (ibid., p. 88, 90). Overall,

[t]he report reiterated the *cri de coeur* of every similar document since 1851 – namely that the position of Great Britain as a leading industrial nation was being endangered by a failure to secure the fullest possible application of science to industry; this failure being partly due to deficiencies in education (Argles, 1964: 86).

One specific example of this 'cri de coeur' in this instance is that the report expressed concerns about the extent to which part-time education was appropriate to train individuals for highly skilled technical roles in the labour market (Parry, 2016: 90). Instead, a full-time course including workplace-based training was considered a better model (ibid.). Along these lines, the Report made recommendations such as 'that a strictly limited number of Technical Colleges should develop technological courses comparable in standard with university degree courses' and 'that full-time and "sandwich" courses of degree standard should be established' (Cantor and Roberts, 1983: 3). Although many

²² In short, the more closely an institution's provision resembled that of universities, the further up in the hierarchy they would be.

of the Percy Report's recommendations were eventually brought into being, it took over ten years for its impact to come to fruition (Shattock, 2012: 19).

2.3 Further expansion and the evolution of the binary system

In the meantime, the number of students in FE continued to grow, notably without a great deal of coordination or planning from one local authority to another. By the mid-1950s, the total number of FE students in England and Wales had increased from 1,595,000 to nearly 2,250,000 (Cantor and Roberts, 1972: 1). A key consequence of this rapid and largely uncoordinated expansion is that it led to 'a patchwork-quilt of further education establishments developed in the decade after the end of the war' (Cantor and Roberts, 1972: 3). With limited funding and lacking the ability to work collaboratively across different regions, local education authorities established new institutions and courses on what could be called an as-needed basis (ibid.). Despite the fact that they were meant 'to submit Further Education Development Plans and had to consult neighbouring authorities, each authority tended to go ahead with its own plan...with little thought to the availability of similar courses elsewhere' (ibid.).

This type of development continued until 1956, when a circular (Ministry of Education, 1956a) published alongside a White Paper (Ministry of Education, 1965b) put forward 'a four-level classification of major establishments and a description and rationale for the positioning of colleges in each tier' (Parry, 2016: 90). The four levels consisted of different types of FE institutions, each of which it was thought would be responsible for particular spaces within FE provision: local colleges; area colleges; regional colleges; and

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colleges of advanced technology.²³ The latter three groups were to provide at least some advanced FE (with the colleges of advanced technology providing only advanced, mainly full-time, programmes), while the local colleges would focus almost entirely on non-advanced FE, which was largely provided on a part-time basis (Parry, 2016: 90-92). Across the four groups

were nearly 200 further education establishments engaged, in some measure, in advanced work. These colleges varied widely, from institutions whose most advanced provision consisted of one or two HNC [Higher National Certificate] courses to others that provided diploma, external degree, and even postgraduate courses (Parry, 2016: 92).

Hence, much like HE in FE in the twenty-first century, the advanced provision taking place within FE establishments was ‘confusingly and paradoxically...both substantial and at the same time marginal’ (Scott, 2009: 402).

Although the years immediately following the 1956 White Paper saw less growth than the decade immediately prior, ‘the number of full-time and sandwich students had increased nearly threefold and the number of part-time students by about a third’ (Cantor and Roberts, 1972: 9). At the same time, ‘the pressure on the [university] system was [also] growing’ (Stevens, 2004: 19). While the number of students attending universities at this point was much smaller (approximately 82,000 at English universities as of 1954, not including around 28,000 students attending teacher training colleges), the percentage of the college-age population going to university was also increasing (Stevens, 2004: 13-19). By 1961, 4.1 per cent of the college-age population went to university, more than double the percentage from 1950 (ibid.).

²³ Parry (2016) argues that ‘[m]any of the elements in this framework for institutional differentiation’ grew out of the Percy Report. See Parry (ibid.) for more information on the historical context and the types of institutions in the framework.

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Data from 1958/59 also indicate that by this stage,²⁴ there were more students pursuing advanced FE courses (90,000) than there were in the universities (83,000) (Parry, 2016: 89). This difference continued to grow in subsequent years, and by 1962/63, there were approximately 139,000 HE students in FE institutions and 107,000 in universities (Parry, 2014: 199).²⁵ In other words, there were more HE in FE students than there were university students. However, while the vast majority (98,000) of university students were attending full-time, most of those in FE institutions (101,000) were attending part-time (ibid.).

It is against this background that in 1961, the Robbins Committee on Higher Education (which later published the Robbins Report in 1963) was commissioned, largely with the aim of bringing more coherence and coordination to higher education (including advanced FE) provision. In official terms, their task was to ‘review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain and in the light of national needs and resources to advise Her Majesty’s Government on what principles its long-term development should be based’ (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: iii).

Although the Committee’s terms specified their focus as being *full-time* HE, ‘the scope of the inquiry was broadened to include the situation and future role of part-time higher education’ (Parry, 2014: 187). This meant that despite a general sense of ‘unease with part-time provision’ (Parry, 2016: 93), the Committee ‘took a broad interpretation of its remit and, from the beginning, was determined to assemble a body of evidence that treated higher education

²⁴ Data collected prior to 1954/55 did not separate advanced from non-advanced FE, and it took an additional four years before students who only attended in the evening were included in data (Parry, 2016: 88-89).

²⁵ These figures include students in England and Wales only.

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as a system' (Parry, 2014: 193). As such, Robbins described HE as it existed in the early 1960s 'as a system of three sectors': the universities; the collection of institutions offering teacher training; and the FE institutions offering advanced FE (ibid., p. 194-197).

Many of the Report's 178 recommendations were directly related to creating more capacity in the HE system as a whole in order to allow for the development of full-time provision at universities. In other words, the 'recommendations were essentially an attempt to convert an unco-ordinated (sic) provision of higher education into a system based on the university', with a diminished role for FE institutions (Cantor and Roberts, 1983: 89). This aim was not to be achieved, however, by removing advanced work from FE establishments entirely; instead, the idea was to promote some of them to university status based on 'the record of achievement of individual institutions' (Parry, 2016: 93). While the government broadly agreed with the aim to expand the HE, it instead

opted for a 'binary' system, whereby the provision of higher education was to be shared by the universities, the colleges of education,²⁶ and new institutions to be called polytechnics (Cantor and Roberts, 1983: 90).

The binary policy created a dividing line between institutions based upon how they were to be funded for their advanced provision: whereas universities would continue to be funded by the national government, polytechnics and the colleges would be funded, like other FE establishments, by the local education authorities.

²⁶ 'Colleges of education', also sometimes called colleges of HE, were teacher training colleges that were renamed after 1963 (Cantor and Roberts, 1983: 89).

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In the three decades that followed, many of what had been FE institutions became HE institutions through ‘four waves of incorporation’ (Scott, 2009: 404-406).²⁷ In the first wave, the former colleges of advanced technology were renamed ‘technological universities’ (Scott, 2009: 404). Their incorporation as HE institutions was followed closely by the second wave (*ibid.*), during which 70 specialist colleges were selected to create 30 polytechnics (Bristow, 1976: 145).²⁸ The third wave consisted of ‘the designation of a small number²⁹ of the larger and more diverse colleges of higher education as universities’ (*ibid.*, p. 405).³⁰ The fourth ‘wave’ (which Scott acknowledges ‘was not really a wave at all’) refers to the on-going involvement of general FE colleges³¹ in HE (*ibid.*, p. 404).

As evidenced by this history, HE in FE developed during this period largely through a combination of mergers and rebranding, with more and more FE establishments being subsumed into the HE sector. Consequently, ‘lacking a strong policy steer, [HE in FE] grew in unplanned, unsustainable ways’ (Howard, 2002: 3). In addition, although the number of university students grew following Robbins, HE proceeded to expand in *all* institutions, not just in

²⁷ Scott (2009: 403) argues that ‘[t]he development of mass higher education systems over the past half-century has followed two distinct paths: expansion and enlargement (or incorporation)’. Expansion is linked to the increase in student numbers and founding of new universities, whereas incorporation refers to the process of established HE systems subsuming what Scott (*ibid.*) calls ‘other [meaning non-university] tertiary-level institutions’.

²⁸ At the time, it was thought that these new polytechnics would be ‘the main centres for the future development of full-time higher education within the further education system’ (Department of Education and Science, 1966: 183, see point 28: ii).

²⁹ Stevens (2004: 67) lists four examples: Humberside; Bournemouth; Anglia; and West London. He (*ibid.*) also mentions the University of Gloucestershire, which resulted from merging what had been two local higher education colleges.

³⁰ Scott (2009: 405) characterises this particular wave as a ‘footnote’, implying that it happened alongside other changes, without much attention being drawn to it specifically.

³¹ A ‘general FE college’ is a descriptor that emerged in the 1970s, when ‘many technical colleges diversified their provision and turned themselves into general colleges’ (Parry, 2016: 96). This shift resulted from an economic recession, which led to ‘a subsequent decline in manufacturing that severely reduced the intake of apprentices and technicians’ (*ibid.*).

universities. Needless to say, this pattern of growth did not resemble what Robbins had envisioned and, as will be explored in the next section, it was only a matter of time before the financial consequences of this expansion began to put a new type of pressure on the HE system.

2.4 The beginning of 'the English experiment'

Throughout most of the 1980s, polytechnics, colleges of HE and FE colleges were still funded by the local education authorities. Following the Education Act of 1988, however, polytechnics and colleges of HE were moved into a newly established polytechnics and college sector and funded, like universities, by the central government. Parry (2009: 330) argues that '[t]his three-sector structure for post-school education was the culmination of efforts by central Government over two decades to control the costs and spread of advanced further education'. This arrangement lasted only four years, when the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 formalised the separation of FE and HE by placing FE colleges and other primarily FE providers into a newly created FE sector and universities, polytechnics and colleges of HE into a newly created HE sector. Additionally, the government established two new non-departmental public bodies, the Further Education Funding Council for England (FEFC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which were responsible for funding the activity of their respective sectors.³² This separation demonstrated the belief that FE and HE

³² Although HEFCE still exists, the FEFC was replaced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2001, which was then replaced by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in 2010.

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stood for different levels of learning and, for this main reason, should be provided by separate types of organisation...and, without serious challenge then or since, it has become part of the taken-for-granted world of further and higher education (Parry, 2009: 332).

Because of this assumption, no arrangements were ever put in place for managing the overlap that existed between the two, particularly the overlap in the provision of undergraduate education. This situation is particularly disconcerting to consider in light of the expansion taking place at the same time: from 1991 to 1993, the age-participation rate grew from 19 per cent to 30 per cent (Barnett and Bjarnason, 1999: 88). However, while 'it was the polytechnics, followed by the universities, that led to the spectacular growth after 1988, some of this [HE] provision was taken by the colleges' (Parry, 2009: 333). In fact, many colleges at the time 'taught undergraduate programmes on behalf of the fastest growing polytechnics' (ibid.). Nevertheless, this circumstance did not change the supposedly separate responsibilities of each sector.

As HE continued to expand, funding its growth became a serious problem for the government. At the time,

there was a real sense of crisis in UK higher education. Under Conservative stewardship the system had experienced the following: significant lurches of policy (from contraction to expansion and then to what was euphemistically termed 'consolidation'); major changes in governance and organisation (from institutional stratification to radical de-stratification); and from 'national' consolidation of funding methods (the so-called ending of the 'binary line') to territorial devolution; and, above all, the strains of under funding (Watson, 2014: 134 referring to previous work by Watson and Bowden, 1999).

The Dearing Committee (or the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education) was therefore assembled 'to make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including

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support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years' (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997: see section entitled *Terms of reference*).

In addition to recommending—for the first time—to charge fees for full-time students, Dearing also recommended further expansion, particularly through sub-degree provision in FE colleges (Parry, 2009: 334). More specifically, Recommendation 67 (see National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997: Annex A) stated 'that, in the medium term, priority growth in sub-degree provision should be accorded to further education colleges; and that, wherever possible:

- more sub-degree provision should take place in further education colleges;
- higher education provision in further education colleges should be funded directly;
- there should be no growth in degree level qualifications offered by further education colleges'.

This list of recommendations (among others) led to a succession of policies intended to grow sub-degree provision within colleges, thus expanding the reach of undergraduate HE even further (and, as an intended consequence, widening participation). This series of policy moves form what Parry (2009: 323) calls 'the English experiment', a strategy meant 'to change the pattern of future demand for, and supply of, undergraduate education and higher-level training' by shifting more of it into FE colleges.

There are many reasons why this strategy was used, the most relevant here being that the Dearing Committee anticipated a higher level of demand for HE qualifications other than the bachelor's degree, especially the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) (Parry, 2016:

97). In 2001, as part of the strategy to stimulate growth, the government also introduced the foundation degree: a two-year HE qualification with a vocational focus (HEFCE, 2000a). Notably, in addition to being ‘the first new major qualification in English higher education since the introduction of the diploma of higher education in the 1970s; it was the first time that a sub-bachelor qualification carried the title of “degree”’ (Parry, 2009: 335). However, even an early evaluation of this new qualification indicated that 21 per cent of foundation degree students claimed their main reason for pursuing it was the opportunity to pursue a bachelor’s degree (York Consulting Group, 2004).³³ As such, the foundation degree potentially contributed, at least in part, to the subsequent growth in demand for first-degree provision: although undergraduate education continued to grow across the board, the demand for bachelor’s degrees surpassed that of any lower qualification.³⁴

Partly because of the lack of sub-degree growth, the further expansion of HE provision became a responsibility shared by universities and colleges. Universities could not continue to expand without additional capacity, and, without degree awarding powers of their own, colleges could not offer HE qualifications without university partners. Therefore, despite Dearing’s strong belief in the FE colleges as places for widening participation, ‘one of the key principles informing the elaboration and execution of HE policy for the colleges was “collaboration”’ with the universities (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 35).

³³ This finding was based on a survey of 841 foundation degree students (York Consulting Group, 2004: 5), which represents 5.6 per cent of the 14,945 foundation degree students there were in 2003/04 (HEFCE, 2008: 11). There were eight possible responses to the question ‘What is the main reason for deciding to study for a Foundation Degree?’ (York Consulting Group, 2004: Annex B, question 31).

³⁴ Foundation degree students can complete a bachelor’s degree by taking a ‘top-up’ year after finishing their foundation degree.

2.5 Collaboration between the HE and FE sectors

In practice, this post-Dearing ‘collaboration’ between HE and FE manifested itself in two key ways. First, because Dearing recommended that all HE funding (regardless of institutional location) be provided by HEFCE³⁵ and that its quality be assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), relationships developed between FEIs and these HE bodies, despite their being in separate sectors (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 35). As a result of HEFCE being given ‘responsibility for the funding of all undergraduate and postgraduate education in England’ (Parry, Thompson, and Blackie, 2006: 10), the number of colleges funded by HEFCE more than tripled, from 70 to over 260, within a year (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 39).³⁶ Additionally, the QAA, which had only existed for two years at the time, ‘had to plan for a greater volume of subject review visits involving the colleges, many of which had little or no previous experience of QAA requirements and processes’ (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 45).

Second, partnerships developed between colleges and universities, primarily for funding purposes and to allow for expansion through widening participation. When HEFCE took over HE funding from the FEFC, FECs were given three options for their funding arrangements: direct funding (described above, where FECs maintained their own relationships with HEFCE and the QAA); indirect funding; or consortia funding (HEFCE, 1999a). Both the indirect and consortia funding options required FECs to receive their funding via a

³⁵ There are a few minor exceptions to this, such as ‘professional and craft provision and Level 4 and 5 National Vocational Qualifications’, all of which were funded by the FEFC until 2000, when financial responsibility was transferred to the LSC (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 42). Some FEIs still receive funding from the SFA (the LSC’s successor) for particular HE courses that are not eligible for HEFCE funding (HEFCE, 2015b).

³⁶ See HEFCE (1998) for more detail on the policy changes behind this increase.

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partner HEI, who would be directly funded by HEFCE.³⁷ Funding arrangements also determined the institution at which HE students would be registered: when FEIs received direct funding, the HE students would typically be both registered and taught at the FEI. In contrast, in an indirect funding arrangement, the students would normally be registered with an HEI or 'parent' institution and then taught at an FEI (in other words, the teaching would be 'franchised' to the FEI).³⁸ Regardless of how they received HE funding, FEIs would be required to partner with universities to validate their HE qualifications.³⁹ Nearly half of the 283 FEIs involved (47 per cent or 132) requested a combination of direct and indirect funding from 2000-2001, while smaller numbers requested only direct (24 per cent or 70) or indirect (29 per cent or 81) funding (HEFCE, 2000b).

Through indirect funding arrangements, universities were able to take on more students and 'franchise' them for their teaching to FECs. Using this strategy, universities could expand their reach by awarding degrees to more students without using their own staff and facilities.⁴⁰ For both colleges and universities, indirect and consortia funding required time-intensive administration. Nevertheless, from the 1999/00 academic year to 2009/10, the

³⁷ In consortia funding arrangements, although funding would flow through the 'lead' university, each institution or 'member' was individually accountable for quality assurance (HEFCE, 2012c). Following a HEFCE-led review of HE in FE in 2006, consortia arrangements were changed to reflect all other indirect funding relationships, meaning that the 'lead institution' of the former consortia assumed full, rather than shared, responsibility for funding, quality assurance, and data returns for all 'member' institutions in its consortia (HEFCE, 2007a: see paragraph 22).

³⁸ For more detail on direct and indirect funding arrangements, please refer to the 'Direct and indirect funding' section of HEFCE (2015b).

³⁹ Although, as yet, colleges cannot award bachelor's degrees, five colleges in England have foundation degree awarding powers: the Grimsby Institute Group, Hull College, Newcastle College, New College Durham and Warwickshire College (Martin, 2015).

⁴⁰ The ability to grow an institution's student numbers became more important after 1999, when Tony Blair announced the government's goal for 50 per cent of 18-30 year-olds to be in HE by 2010.

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number of FEIs directly funded by HEFCE decreased from 270 to 124 (HEFCE, 1999b: 5, 2012c: see paragraph 16 of the *Introduction and background to higher education* section);⁴¹ a decrease which demonstrates the attractiveness of indirect and consortia funding arrangements in this period. Indeed, Parry, Thompson and Blackie (2006: 59) explain that HEFCE ‘consistently [drew] attention to the likely benefits for quality and the learner experience in establishing collaborative arrangements with HEIs’. Likely as a consequence, ‘most of [the moves from direct to indirect funding] were the result of the formation of strategic multiple partnerships’ between institutions (ibid., p. 60).

Notably, 2012/13 was the first academic year since HEFCE began funding HE in FE that there was an increase in the number of directly funded FE institutions (186 FEIs compared with 129 HEIs, see HEFCE, 2012a and Table 2.1 for further information).⁴² This increase resulted from a policy decision in 2011/12 that encouraged more FE colleges to bid for direct funding and led to some universities closing franchise partnerships (Ertl and Allen, 2014: 314). More specifically, the government reserved 20,000 low-cost university places and allowed institutions charging fees of less than £7,500 to bid for them (Coughlan, 2012). Since only institutions charging fees below this threshold could compete for these places, this decision highlighted the government’s desire for colleges ‘to be more directly competitive to drive down the average

⁴¹ Parry, Thompson and Blackie (2006: 60) point out that ‘the majority of the changes from direct to indirect funding were in the first three years’ after HEFCE began offering direct funding to FE colleges. Therefore, while the number of directly funded colleges continued to decline in this period, the decrease ‘from a high of 270 in 1999-00 to 202 by 2001-02’ is particularly notable (Parry et al., 2012: 51).

⁴² The same year, 245 colleges had indirect funding relationships with HEFCE (Parry et al., 2012: 46).

fee levels' (Expert 4, 2012).⁴³ When outlining HE funding for 2012/13, HEFCE (2012b: 2) noted the impact of this new policy on their number of directly funded institutions, stating '[w]e are directly funding an additional 65 further education colleges in 2012-13 as a result of a recent invitation to bid for full-time undergraduate places'. Since then, the number of FECs funded by the HEFCE has continued to rise, with a high of 214 in 2015/16. Though looking at funding in terms of numbers of institutions does not take into account how the amount of funding differs between universities and FE colleges, it is striking that HEFCE interacts directly with such a high number of FEIs.

Table 2.1 Institutions directly funded by HEFCE from 2009-2016

Year	Universities (per cent)	FEIs (per cent)
2009/10	130 (51%)	124 (49%)
2010/11	130 (51%)	123 (49%)
2011/12	130 (51%)	124 (49%)
2012/13	129 (41%)	186 (59%)
2013/14	129 (39%)	203 (61%)
2014/15	130 (38%)	212 (62%)
2015/16	130 (38%)	214 (62%)

Data from: HEFCE, 2009; 2010a; 2011: 2; 2012a; 2013b; 2014; 2015a

Although the number of directly funded colleges is published every year by HEFCE, it is not as straightforward to find the number of indirectly funded colleges at any given time. Therefore, it can be difficult to ascertain how many colleges in total are involved at HE at any point. According to data from 2009/10, 81 per cent of FE institutions (including both directly and indirectly funded institutions) were involved in HE provision (Parry et al., 2012: 65) that year, despite the fact that just 4 per cent of students in the FE sector were

⁴³ This quote comes from one of the expert interviews conducted as part of this study. These interviews are discussed further in 4.4.1.

pursuing HE.⁴⁴ On an institutional level, though, 82 per cent (or 231) of FEIs providing HE had fewer than 1000 HE students (ibid., p. 66). Less than half (43 per cent) of colleges had 500 or more (ibid., p. 66). As of 2016, estimates published on the HEFCE website suggest that '[o]ver 250 colleges offer HE, ranging from those with fewer than 50 students to those with nearly 4,000' (HEFCE, 2016). Hence, the general trend of HE maintaining 'a small presence in all but a minority of colleges' (Parry et al., 2012: 65) remains the same.

2.6 Summarising the history of HE in FE policy and provision

Tracing the development of HE in FE from the founding of Mechanics' Institutes through to 2016 clearly demonstrates that FE institutions were never really intended to offer the same type of provision as universities. Indeed, one of the primary reasons that FEIs emerged was to meet the educational needs of a population who would not necessarily have considered going to university. However, as the post-school education system in England evolved throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the educational purpose of different FE institutions became progressively less well-defined: in addition to offering a wide variety of vocational qualifications, many of them were 'upgraded' to university status and became vehicles for HE expansion. Although they have since repeatedly contributed to the capacity of the English HE system to expand and played a key role in the system's ability to widen participation, the policies driving the shape and scope of HE in FE have not been consistent across different periods and governments (Parry, 2016).

⁴⁴ In HEIs at the time, 98 per cent were HE students and 2 per cent were FE students (Parry et al., 2012: 63).

Chapter 2 • An overview of HE in FE history and policy

Despite a history that demonstrates ‘the normality of colleges with comprehensive or mixed-sector missions spanning further and higher education’ (Parry, 2016: 103), the reality is that colleges offering both ‘are sometimes regarded as anomalies that must be resolved’ (Scott, 2009: 416); moreover, ‘different (and to some degree, contradictory) funding and quality regimes persist’ (ibid.). At the same time, there seems to be a ‘regular rediscovery of college higher education in official narratives’ (Parry, 2016: 103), as if their contribution in this space is a new phenomenon. Although there is no question that, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, HE in FE can be a complicated area to both understand and research, the lack of policy memory about the development of this provision remains a significant issue (Parry, 2016).

3 EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter focuses on the empirical literature available about HE in FE, concentrating on the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of HE in FE bachelor's⁴⁵ students in England. As explained at the beginning of Chapter 2, the bulk of the literature to be covered was published after 1997, although some older literature is also used.

This review begins with a discussion of the challenges encountered when attempting to understand and research HE in FE, which includes a summary of the relevant empirical data available and its limitations. The subsequent three sections deal directly with literature related to this study's research questions, with one focused on students' decisions about HE, the second on their experiences and the third on their post-graduation expectations and outcomes. The chapter concludes with a summary of the empirical work reviewed.

3.1 The challenges of understanding and researching HE in FE

There is no question that '[c]omprehending the intricate character of [HE in FE] is a complicated task' and 'researching this segment of [HE] is no less straightforward' than simply understanding it (Parry et al., 2012: 22). Among other characteristics, the scale, complexity and status of HE in FE means that the 'nature of [this provision] is poorly understood, even though it is central to government policies on expansion, diversity and widening participation in

⁴⁵ It varies by programme as to whether students can earn a bachelor's degree or a bachelor's degree with honours. According to the QAA (2008: 18-19), the 'qualification descriptor' for the bachelor's degree with honours, which lists the competencies and skills a graduate with this qualification would be expected to have, can also be applied to the bachelor's degree without honours. Therefore, bachelor's degree will take precedence here except where specifying 'with honours' is required.

English [HE]' (Parry, 2012: 118). As a relatively small pocket of provision that takes place in institutions outside of the HE sector, but whose existence requires collaboration across sectors, '[t]he potential for confusion is considerable' (ibid.).

One of the most confusing aspects of HE in FE, though, is also one of its assets: its heterogeneity. In their review of HE in FE provision in England, Parry et al. (2012: 175) found this feature to be '[t]he most important characteristic of higher education provision in FECs'. It is an attribute that is evident at both the macro and micro levels:

[t]he high-level distinctions between prescribed and non-prescribed provision, between franchised students and validated programmes or between 'vocational' and 'academic' subjects only scratch the surface; the heterogeneity runs much deeper. On almost every scale—number of HE students, balance of HE and FE provision in individual colleges, number of external validators and accreditors, depth of employer links—there are significant differences (Parry et al., 2012: 175).

The benefits and consequences related to this characteristic of HE in FE are equally important. On the one hand, its variety is arguably one reason why HE in FE is able to cater to such a diverse range of students, and there is evidence that this provision both increases access and widens participation (Parry et al., 2012). On the other hand, this feature also prevents people from understanding what HE in FE is, why it exists or how to access it. Therefore, certain aspects of this heterogeneity, such as '[t]hese divided structures and the dual regimes and semi-compulsory partnerships required by a two-sector system have, it is contended, hindered the development of policy and provision' (Parry, 2012: 122).

These circumstances also lead to challenges for researchers interested in HE in FE. These challenges include, but are not limited to: the lack of

consistent data collection methods for HE in FE (and the complications its diversity leads to in the data which is available); the constantly shifting HE and FE policy landscape, which causes persistent changes in this area of provision;⁴⁶ and the amount of technical vocabulary needed to discuss HE in FE. This vocabulary includes a number of dualities, such as prescribed/non-prescribed HE and advanced/non-advanced HE, in addition to phrases such as ‘franchised students’. Even using the term ‘higher education institution’ is not straightforward, as colleges who offer HE can technically be called HEIs in some contexts, even though they are not officially in the HE sector (Leahy, 2012: 173). Discussing HE in FE can also lead to debates as to what ‘higher’ education is and whether ‘further’ education institutions can offer it (Creasy, 2013).

Perhaps in part as a consequence of these issues, the empirical literature in this area is limited and can be difficult to access. As Jones (2006b: 15) explains in his literature review,

the context of HE in FE is still developing. Both published and grey literature can prove difficult to obtain. Research-wise, the FE sector is comparatively neglected, and is sandwiched between compulsory education and HE—both of which are the subject of considerably more empirical inquiry and, consequently, can both be viewed with a much broader range of theoretical frameworks. It is therefore hardly surprising that, as a small part of FE, research in and on HE in FE has yet to flourish.

This situation has changed somewhat since Jones’s review, as demonstrated by three additional HE in FE literature reviews published since 2006 (Greenwood, 2010; Parry et al., 2012; and Thompson, 2014).⁴⁷ In addition, more recent

⁴⁶ Due to policy changes that occur between conducting research and disseminating it, many findings related to HE in FE already out of date by the time studies are published.

⁴⁷ Greenwood (2010: 40) also mentions a repository of HE in FE literature compiled by Scofield (2007). However, the link to this work included by Greenwood (*ibid.*, p. 52) is no longer active, and attempts to access this repository through other methods (e.g. contacting the researcher directly) during the course of this research proved unsuccessful.

research contributes to the development of theory about HE in FE, for example through using Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital (e.g. Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Leahy, 2012) and Hernes' work on organisational boundaries (e.g. Burns, 2007), among others.

Nevertheless, much of the research available about HE in FE focuses on policy rather than practice. For example, Greenwood's (2010: 38) review claims that the

majority of the research on HE in FE has looked at the history and policy of the development of the 'dual' system and the implications for FECs. The combined policy strands of widening participation and expansion of student participation in HE has resulted in an emphasis on how FECs are able to support and deliver to the government's agenda.

More recently, Parry et al. (2012: 34) also discovered that there is 'generally more written about policy, management and organisation; and relatively little on the costs of provision, the experiences of students and the perspectives of employers'.⁴⁸ Moreover, they (ibid.) add that 'small-scale studies are common, often with limited scope for generalisation or comparison'. Hence, our knowledge about how HE in FE developed, how it operates and how it is used in policy is more advanced than our understanding of its micro-level issues, including students' journeys from entering through to exiting HE. In particular, the HE in FE student journey at the bachelor's level is not as well represented in the literature and, therefore, is not as well understood.

The majority of empirical research available about HE in FE students focuses either on student progression (either from FE to HE qualifications, e.g. Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009, or from foundation degrees to bachelor's

⁴⁸ Parry et al. (2012: 34) also cite the increasing literature about 'strategy, teaching and scholarly activity'.

degrees, e.g. Morgan, 2013), the experiences of foundation degree students (e.g. Higgins, Artess and Johnstone, 2010) or the staff perspective of delivering HE in FE (e.g. Burkill, Dyer and Stone, 2008; Griffiths and Golding Lloyd, 2009). While the aforementioned HE in FE literature reviews (Jones, 2006b; Greenwood, 2010; Parry et al., 2012; and Thompson, 2014) also contribute to knowledge about HE in FE students, these are not strictly focused on full-time bachelor's degree students. For example, Thompson (2014) provides an overview of what HE in FE is, how it is funded, how data is collected about it and some of the key issues in providing it, but the bulk of this review deals with issues related to part-time higher vocational education students in FE.

As of 2011, an initial search of the British Educational Index using the terms 'higher education' and 'further education' and 'bachelor's degree' resulted in just eight articles, only two of which were relevant to this study: one about the staff perspective of delivering a bachelor's degree in a college (Griffiths and Golding Lloyd, 2009) and one about the student experience of transitioning from a foundation degree to a bachelor's degree (Winter and Dismore, 2010).⁴⁹ Although broadening the search slightly (using 'degree' rather than specifying 'bachelor's degree') resulted in more hits (119 in total, 68 of which were published after 1997), none of these were strictly about the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of bachelor's degree students within FE settings. Those articles that were related were peripheral rather than central to this topic. Attempting different combinations of related words (such as replacing 'further education' with 'college') did not drastically

⁴⁹ Running this search again in January 2016 resulted in four articles, only two of which were relevant—the same two that were found in 2011.

change the amount of results or the number of those that were relevant. The reality is that many of the most relevant reports, such as those published by the Association of Colleges (e.g. Hudson and Berzins, 2011) or BIS (Parry et al., 2012), cannot necessarily be found through literature database searches. Therefore, initially compiling sources for this review resulted from reading policy documents (e.g. BIS, 2011), data published by the government (such as HEFCE's set of regional profiles, which are discussed in 4.4.2.1), and large-scale studies (such as The FurtherHigher Project, further details about which are available via University of Sheffield, 2014) mentioned by experts (the expert interviews conducted for this study are described 4.4.1).

Of the studies available which do include some data about bachelor's students within colleges (e.g. Esmond, 2012; Parry et al., 2012; King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2013; Rapley, 2014), only one (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004) aims to directly compare HE in FE with HE in universities, and none focus solely on full-time bachelor's degree provision. Instead, findings related to bachelor's degree students in colleges are often presented alongside findings related to other HE in FE qualifications. As a result, any conclusions drawn from such studies are often either too crude, because they generalise findings from a range of HE in FE qualifications to make claims about *all* HE in FE students' experiences, or they try to explain the experiences of many different types of HE in FE students at the same time, which can be confusing even for knowledgeable readers. Consequently, understanding the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of bachelor's students in FE settings requires piecing together sections of literature from many different sources.

3.2 The empirical data available about HE in FE bachelor's students

3.2.1 Deciding to pursue HE in FE

Notwithstanding a clear lack of empirical data focused on HE in FE bachelor's students, policymakers continue to encourage the development of HE in FE (Parry et al., 2012; see Chapter 2 of their study in particular for more information on this topic). Yet despite an on-going political promotion of HE in FE since 1997, 'there is little evidence of overall growth during this period' (Parry, 2012: 121). Although the interest in expanding this provision makes sense given the contributions it is believed to make to the government's aims, nothing that has been said about it or done seems to have substantially increased development. This lack of growth indicates that advocating HE in FE via policy does not inherently mean that more students will choose HE in FE. In fact, as will be demonstrated below, there is little evidence to suggest that HE in FE students choose to go to college over other options.

3.2.1.1 Do college students have a choice?

Data from a 2012 survey of HE in FE students demonstrate that as a group, college students are more in agreement about why they pursue HE than why they go to a college (Parry et al., 2012: 109).⁵⁰ More specifically, most HE in FE students enter HE with the aim of 'improving their life opportunities (71 per cent), getting a good job (62 per cent), pursuing higher education as part of their long-term career plan (62 per cent), needing a higher education qualification to get ahead (54 per cent), and wanting to study a particular

⁵⁰ Parry et al.'s (2012) study included college students pursuing a wide range of HE in FE qualifications. Of the 2,523 students surveyed by Parry et al. (ibid., p. 109), 614 students (or 24 per cent) were studying for their bachelor's degree. However, some sections of analysis include all student groups and do not isolate bachelor's students. Where possible, Parry et al.'s (ibid.) findings specific to bachelor's students are used here.

subject/course (52 per cent)' (ibid., p. 116). Although these responses are fairly consistent across different groups, 'younger students aged 20 and under and those studying full-time particularly [tend to stress] their desire for better opportunities, getting a good job, and wanting to study a particular subject/course' (ibid.).

When asked to choose their most important reason⁵¹ for entering HE, the most significant reasons (similar across all student groups) are directly linked to future aspirations; for example, 'higher education was part of their long-term career plan (20%), would give them better opportunities in life (19%), and help them get a good job (15%)' (Parry et al., 2012: 116). These findings appear to align with similar studies about students at universities, with few exceptions (ibid.).⁵² Therefore, the data available provide a strong sense that both college and university students believe HE will contribute to a better future. This point is also supported by work on graduates' beliefs about the value of their degree, which found that 'decisions to pursue degree-level study appeared to be driven, at least to some extent, by a belief that the options available to non-graduates were diminishing rapidly' (Brooks and Everett, 2009: 337).

In contrast, students' reasons for choosing to go to a college are not as consistent. Those who participated in the aforementioned study by Parry et al. (2012: 117) 'did not identify any single reason for studying at a college rather

⁵¹ In the questionnaire for Parry et al.'s (2012) study, students were asked first to indicate all of their reasons and then to choose the most important reason.

⁵² Parry et al. (2012: 116) mention two exceptions. One is a study (Purcell et al., 2008) in which 'full-time undergraduates placed greater emphasis on their desire to study a particular subject/course' and the other is a study about part-time students (Callender, Hopkin and Wilkinson, 2010), who 'stressed their desire to do something useful/different with their life' (quotes from Parry et al., 2012: 116).

than a university, suggesting that numerous factors influenced them'. However, the 'most popular reasons were associated with the college offer, and the familiarity and safety of colleges' learning environment' (ibid.). Among the most popular reasons, students mentioned 'the course they wanted to take only being available at the college (34%), having already studied at a college (33%), the larger amount of contact with lecturers and tutors (29%), lower tuition fees at a college (28%), and they thought they would feel comfortable at a college (27%)' (ibid., p. 117-118). Overall, though, there was 'no dominant most important reason for students selecting a college over a university' in Parry et al.'s study (ibid., p. 118) and, in general, 'students did not hold strong views on the relative merits of university and college higher education provision' (ibid., p. 119). Furthermore, 'there was limited evidence of students perceiving colleges as giving them a better learning and student experience than universities' (ibid., p. 120). Nevertheless, in comparing their findings with those from other studies about university students, Parry et al. (ibid., p. 126) found that university students were more concerned than college students about their institution's reputation and its location in terms of being 'in an attractive and interesting place' when deciding where to go for HE.

These findings reveal some of the reasons why students might choose to go to a college for HE: to take a specific course; for convenience; to access more staff support; to pay less; and to be in a comfortable environment. However, they also directly challenge the idea that HE in FE students intentionally decide to go to college over university. In particular, the top two most popular reasons given above (wanting to take a particular course or already being a college

student) imply that this decision could be made by default, rather than by choosing one option from many.

Within the context of this study, this point means that while college and university students might be comparable in terms of why they decide to go to HE, their decision-making processes cannot necessarily be compared like for like. Because this study isolates bachelor's degree students, rather than those pursuing a wide range of HE and FE qualifications, it could reveal more clarity regarding choice of institution. In other words, it might be that bachelor's students as a group are more in agreement as to why they go to college than HE in FE students overall.

3.2.1.2 Transitions to bachelor's degree level education

One of the more well-evidenced differences between bachelor's degree students at colleges and universities is that those at colleges are more varied in terms of their highest qualification upon entry. For both college and university entrants, A-levels are the highest qualification attained by the largest proportion of students. However, A-levels are more common amongst bachelor's degree entrants at universities (66 per cent of whom have them) compared with those at colleges (35 per cent) (Parry et al., 2012: 67). Four other categories account for at least at least one-tenth of college student entrants, the largest of which is 'other undergraduate' (21 per cent) (ibid.).⁵³ In contrast, only 8 per cent of university entrants enter with 'other undergraduate' as their highest qualification (ibid.).⁵⁴ These numbers indicate that a larger

⁵³ The other three are unknown (12 per cent); BTEC level 3 (10 per cent); and accreditation of prior learning (10 per cent) (Parry et al., 2012: 67).

⁵⁴ As with colleges, this category is the most popular one behind A-levels in terms of highest qualification upon entry for university students (Parry et al., 2012: 67).

proportion⁵⁵ of college students than university students begin a bachelor's degree after completing a more vocationally orientated qualification, such as a Higher National Diploma (HND) or foundation degree (both of which are considered 'other undergraduate').⁵⁶ Since both the HND and foundation degree are HE qualifications, these students transition to bachelor's degree level education relatively late in their HE experience. After two years (if studying full-time) of working on an HND or foundation degree, they have just one year to both adjust to and complete a top-up year for a bachelor's degree.

Relative to other related areas, students' experiences of the transition from level 5 HE qualifications, such as HNDs and foundation degrees, to the bachelor's degree (level 6) are well represented in the literature (Goddard and Penkith, 2007; Greenbank, 2007; Winter and Dismore, 2010; Pike and Harrison, 2011; Thomas, 2011; Morgan, 2013, among others).⁵⁷ However, despite the clear popularity of students progressing to the bachelor's degree (see footnote 56 for data on this progression) and the research available about it, the inadequacy of information students receive when transitioning from level 5 to level 6 is well-documented and continues to be a problem (e.g. Pike and Harrison, 2011; Morgan, 2013).

⁵⁵ The fact that proportions are used here and not real numbers is important. In terms of real numbers, universities surpass colleges in every category in terms of how many bachelor's degree students enter with a particular qualification (Parry et al., 2012: 67). This difference reflects the lower numbers in general of HE students at colleges.

⁵⁶ According to a survey of HND and foundation degree students who graduated in 2013, studying for a first degree was the most common outcome six months after graduation, accounting for 36.9 per cent of those surveyed (Higher Education Careers Services Unit, 2014: 12). In real numbers, this percentage amounts to over 7,500 students. These findings are based on responses from 20,360 HND and foundation degree graduates, which is an 81.5 per cent response rate (ibid.).

⁵⁷ Most of these are small-scale qualitative studies and therefore must be viewed as illustrative of some potential issues experienced by students going through a similar transition rather than representative of all HE in FE bachelor's students. There is also extensive literature available about students' transitions to HE from other pathways, such as vocational education and training (VET) or apprenticeships (e.g. Hoelscher et al., 2008; Joslin and Smith, 2013; Dismore, 2014).

According to Morgan (2011: 18), students should be inducted every time they reach a new academic level. Hence, 'induction to study is not a stage undertaken only by a student entering Level 1: it should be undertaken by all new students regardless of the level they are entering' (ibid.). In explaining the importance of induction in the student lifecycle, Morgan (ibid.) claims '[t]he induction to study stage [in HE] is especially critical for direct-entry, transfer students and distance or work-based learners'. Since most HE in FE bachelor's students fall into at least one, if not more, of these categories, induction is arguably all the more essential for this group.

Induction is important for two reasons. First, it contributes to the development of identity. As Winter and Dismore (2010: 266) argue, 'integration into the HEI [and bachelor's degree] culture often begins at the FEI and...this [is] important in developing an authentic identity as a *university* [rather than college] student'. Even for students who do not change institutions in order to complete a top-up year, assuming the identity of being a bachelor's degree student is an essential part of their journey to become and *feel* like graduates. Thus, induction prior to starting a bachelor's course serves to ease them into this new way of being. Secondly, induction can provide students with the information they need in order to transition smoothly. As Thomas (2011: 12) explains, '[a] framework of targeted and timely information, intervention and induction can meet students' needs for familiarity and recognition'.

In addition to the transition process itself being demanding, 'there may be inherent differences between the foundation degree [or another level 5 qualification] and the honours degree [or level 6] which mean the transition for many students will inevitably be difficult' (Greenbank, 2007: 100). In one study

about students moving from a foundation degree at a college to a top-up year at a university, '[t]he most commonly cited difference [between levels of learning] concerned study skills and academic expectations' (Morgan, 2013: 115). More specifically, students identified criticality, intensive reading, referencing, longer and higher quality assignments and more independent learning as particular to the bachelor's degree (Morgan, 2013: 115).

In a similar study, which also looked at progression between levels 5 and 6, '[t]he data suggest that technical skills, knowledge gaps and expectations about autonomous learning [are] important issues for progression students' (Winter and Dismore, 2010: 261). Therefore, it appears students in the final year of a bachelor's degree are expected to have a skill set which students completing a standalone level 5 qualification, particularly within an FE setting, may not necessarily have developed. Moreover, many of the skills required derive from having 'an increased ability to learn independently', which Jones (2006a: 2) identifies as a potentially key aspect of the 'learning and teaching dimension of an HE ethos'.

For some students, the sudden shift from one learning style to another can be a shock to the system; learning how to cite references, for example, can be similar to learning a new language. However, students sometimes find that particular staff members expect 'that progressing students should already be conversant with what is expected at university level' (Morgan, 2013: 118), even if they have never been taught such skills.

On top of requiring new skills, students who change institutions at the same point must also adapt to a new environment. In this situation, students have to 'adjust to a different course and a new institution; and they [often]

ha[ve] to do this within a nine-month period during which their degree classification [will] be determined' (Greenbank, 2007: 98). This dual change combined with the pressure of knowing that every mark counts adds additional layers of complexity to this transition, thus further compounding the challenges students encounter. Among others, these challenges

include the limited availability of information regarding progression to the top-up year and moving to a new institution; concerns about academic ability in relation to students already on the honours programme; anxieties over whether they would meet the required standards, and their unfamiliarity with what was required; and integrating with a new group of students (Pike and Harrison, 2011: 63).

Given how quickly these students need to adjust to level 6, 'there is little time for students joining the final year of an honours programme to spend time experimenting with different approaches to learning at an HEI', let alone adapt to a different style of learning (Winter and Dismore, 2010: 265-266). Thus, students face these issues, usually in a restricted time frame and often with limited support, can understandably 'appear to be [and feel like] first year students in the body of third year students' (Winter and Dismore, 2010: 265).

Given that the students in this study did not transfer to a university in order to complete their top-up year, many of the findings from previous studies are not directly comparable to their circumstances. However, because they did undertake a transition from level 5 to level 6, it is likely that some of the issues raised in the literature about this shift are applicable to this study's participants. In fact, it is arguable that some of the difficulties faced will appear more acute when these students are compared with university students (who do not go through this transition at the same point in their education).

3.2.2 The HE in FE student experience

There is no question that a student's experience of HE can differ significantly depending on the type of institution attended (Harwood and Harwood, 2004; Burkill, Dyer and Stone, 2010; Creasy, 2013). Despite a limited amount of research about HE in FE bachelor's students' experiences, there are two themes that emerge repeatedly in relevant research: teaching and learning; and facilities and services.

3.2.2.1 Teaching and learning

Although there is some variation from one college to another, studies across different institutions consistently report two key features of the teaching and learning in HE in FE: small class sizes and supportive relationships between students and tutors. Rapley (2014: 194) points out that 'the "supportive environment" and "small classes"' offered by colleges are often presented as 'the unique selling point for those studying in HE in FE (as opposed to HE within the university sector)'. Regardless of whether these are selling points, research largely supports the claim that the college environment is a naturally supportive one, where close relationships between students and staff develop within small cohorts (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004; Parry et al., 2012).

In terms of numbers, Parry, Davies and Williams (2004: 16) found that at the nine universities in their study,

lecture sizes for full-time programmes routinely reached 50–150 [students], with tutorial groups of 15–20 [students]. The size of the latter was more like the typical class size in colleges. If college groups exceeded 20, they were likely to be split.

Therefore, students attending HE in colleges are potentially in classes with only 10 per cent of the students included in some university lectures. In addition, many college students tend to be in classes with the same students (and sometimes the same staff) for every module they take, whereas university students may experience more variability in terms of class composition.

Given these smaller HE cohorts in FE, it seems unsurprising that tutors and students would develop closer relationships than might be possible at universities, where lecturers are potentially teaching hundreds of students at once. Thus, at first glance, this aspect of HE in FE seems to be a numbers game. However, when contrasting this environment with that offered in HEIs, Parry, Davies and Williams (2004: 18) found that '[t]he idea of a nurturing environment was the foundation for the FE ethos [in the eyes of participants] and was seen to contrast strongly with the specialised, centralised and professionalised model of support in the HEIs'. As such, this characteristic of HE in FE is embedded within the culture rather than being a product of circumstance. This point is not to say that universities are unsupportive of their students, or that support is not an essential aspect of their culture; rather, the difference to note is that college students can literally 'go down the corridor to see [their tutors]' (Parry et al., 2012: 122). While this option is also available to students at many universities, there is inevitably more competition for one-to-one attention in a cohort of hundreds than in a group of 20.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether students consider smaller class sizes and close relationships with tutors to be an advantage. Although some students in Hudson and Berzins' (2011) and Parry et al.'s (2012) research described these facets of HE in FE as both a reason to attend college and a

benefit of being there, one discussion group (out of 21 such groups) in Parry et al.'s (2012: 122) study felt that 'small class sizes meant fewer opportunities for learning from each other'. In addition, although some participants from across the discussion groups 'believed they were more likely to succeed in such a smaller, more intimate, environment', others 'were worried that they had become too reliant on tutors and were nervous about leaving the college environment and entering employment' (ibid.). Hence, there is a sense amongst at least some students that pursuing HE in a college environment can be a double-edged sword: they benefit from the support available, but then later potentially suffer the consequences of not feeling self-sufficient in their learning.

An additional point of comparison in the teaching and learning between colleges and universities, which is linked to class sizes and relationships with staff, is the different learning styles used at each. As described above in 3.2.1.2, students who switch to universities for their top-up year after completing previous qualifications at the college encounter some difficulty with adapting to the self-directed learning expected of bachelor's degree students. Some research speculates that the difference between learning in HE and learning in FE could be conceptualised as deep versus surface learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976; Ramsden, 2003; Jones, 2006a). Simply put, while the deep approach is characterised as learning for thorough understanding, the surface approach is more instrumental, linking what needs to be learned to particular objectives (Jones, 2006a: 2-4).

Although there is some evidence that certain HE in FE students, particularly older ones, report more of a deep approach than surface approach

to learning (Christie et al., 2006: 358-359), there are challenges with encouraging a deep approach in a college environment, two of which are discussed by Jones (2006b: 4). First, HE in FE staff who teach both HE and FE students must encourage different students to adapt to different learning styles and therefore might find themselves ‘flitting between suitable pedagogies in such tight turning circles’ (ibid.). Similar issues can occur even when students have the same lecturer for their initial HE qualifications who move with them to their top-up year, because these students will have adjusted to a particular level of support from their lecturer. Second, ‘deep learning, with its stress on self-directed learning, will require excellent resources—such as library facilities and ICT provision’ (ibid.). Along these lines, there is evidence from HE in FE students that a lack of appropriate facilities does impede their ability to ‘do HE work’ (Rapley, 2014: 203). The challenges colleges encounter with offering HE facilities and services will be explored in the next section.

3.2.2.2 Facilities and services

Parry et al. (2012: 89) identify three models or ‘organisational patterns’ to describe how colleges manage to simultaneously offer HE and FE: separation (or ‘separate development’); mixed; or integration.⁵⁸ These models can be thought of as existing along a continuum, where colleges at one end organise HE and FE independently in discrete spaces, sometimes even in separate buildings, to colleges at the other end, who do not divide HE and FE at all. The ‘mixed’ arrangements present along the middle of the continuum are the most

⁵⁸ Regardless of how their provision is physically or spatially organised, all colleges offering HE must still separate it from FE when gathering data for funding, quality assurance or other reasons.

popular (Parry et al., 2012: 88). In this model, HE and FE share some resources, such as tutors who teach both types of provision, but there might also be a senior leader overseeing HE provision⁵⁹ and/or a designated HE 'centre',⁶⁰ which can serve as an operational and social base within the college (ibid.).

No matter where along the spectrum between separation and integration a college falls, the arrangements have implications for the facilities and services available to students. For students at institutions with a clear separation between FE and HE, learning spaces are also often detached. Therefore, HE students might have benefits such as their own building, car park, library, IT facilities, administrative staff and so on. This situation is drastically different from HE students who represent a small minority of the population at their college and must share the same spaces and services with their institution's FE students.

Although issues such as whether HE students have their own place to study might not seem significant from an outsider's perspective, the way in which these boundaries between HE and FE are managed within colleges can clearly influence students' experiences (Burns, 2007). However, it is not entirely certain which is best for students: more separation or more integration.⁶¹ On the one hand, one study found that in a college with

⁵⁹ The fact that a senior leader oversees this provision does not necessarily make it easier to manage. For example, Ertl and Allen (2014: 313) recount the story of one college assistant principal whose institution had only two HE administrative staff members to organise and manage provision for nearly 1,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students.

⁶⁰ Such centres seem most likely to exist in colleges with high numbers of HE students (Jones, 2006a) or what has been called a 'critical mass' of HE students (Parry, Thompson and Blackie, 2006; Parry et al., 2012).

⁶¹ Parry, Thompson and Blackie (2006: 126) isolate 'integration or separation' as a key area for colleges to consider in managing their HE provision.

strong boundaries between FE and HE...staff and courses [were] positioned in FE or HE, requiring students to negotiate the gap between these two “worlds” just as they would if they moved to a different institution (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009: 129).

In this case, even students who aspire to participate in HE can feel far removed from it, despite the fact that it is taking place within the same institution. As a result, Bathmaker and Thomas (2009: 129) argue that ‘the apparent advantage [or at least one of the advantages] of offering both FE and HE in one institution is missed’.

On the other hand, another study discovered that a lack of distinction between FE and HE can cause students to question whether their college is an appropriate or ‘proper’ space for HE (Burns, 2007). In such institutions, the way boundaries are enacted can establish ‘an ethos premised on “younger” learners and on being “FE”’, meaning that students’ actual HE experiences do not align with what they expect HE to be like (ibid., p. 8). Likewise, Rapley (2014: 205) found that for students in this situation, ‘being immersed in an FE culture can spill over (with negative consequences) into HE work’. In addition to causing dissatisfaction while students attend HE in FE (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2013; Rapley 2014), this dynamic can also cause problems like those described in 3.2.1.2, where students struggle to adjust to a new environment if they change institutions for their top-up year.

Rapley’s (2014: 205) observation above also introduces the fact that there is a cultural aspect to the separation of HE and FE alongside the physical aspect. As Parry (2001: 3) argues, ‘sector allegiances and boundaries [are] commonly reproduced in the culture of institutions’. Therefore, institutions whose HE and FE exist in separate ‘sectors’ may mirror the cultural distinctions

evident between these two sectors in the post-compulsory education system. Understandably, those with more mixed provision may find establishing separate cultures more challenging.

Perhaps reflecting the different ways in which HE and FE provision are organised within colleges, the quantitative and qualitative data available about students' HE in FE experiences reveals mixed views regarding access to learning resources. For example, Parry et al. (2012: 120, 213) found conflicting levels of satisfaction with the library,⁶² IT resources and services amongst students, whereas the students in Hudson and Berzins' (2011) study seemed relatively satisfied with their facilities, with the exception of IT (which was reportedly difficult to access). Students from colleges in another study were more likely than any other institutional category to agree with the statement 'Library resources were inadequate' when surveyed about their course (Purcell, Elias and Atfield, 2009: 8; Purcell et al., 2009: 29). Although students in Rapley's (2014: 201-202, 213) study were satisfied with the specialist equipment and resources at their college, they complained about the limitations of the library and a lack of HE space within the college, both for socialising and studying. There is also some evidence of staff reporting similar limitations, such as the HE coordinators at colleges who 'bemoaned the lack of resources to underpin their higher education, especially in relation to their library, sports and social facilities' (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004: 18).

Despite mixed feedback amongst college students regarding their specific institutions, as a group they do report being consistently less satisfied

⁶² One potential benefit reported about college libraries, though, is that 'the smaller scale of the activity in colleges mean[s] that the ratio of texts to students [i]s better than in HEIs' (Parry, Davies, and Williams, 2004: 20).

with their institution's facilities than university students (Parry et al., 2012: 139-142). In practice, this issue is meant to be somewhat resolved by the fact that HE in FE students usually have the ability to use their partner university's facilities, such as their library, as part of their course. However, students who have this option consistently claim to not use it (Hudson and Berzins, 2011: 20; Parry et al., 2012, 144). Since partner universities are 'sometimes a substantial distance from the college' whose courses they validate, students can find 'the distance and the costs of getting to the university' (Parry et al., 2012: 144) to be rather off-putting. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that students do not use their partner university's facilities even when distance is not an issue (ibid.).⁶³ Hence, students do not always benefit from this feature of partnership arrangements.

Discussions about facilities available to students are sometimes interwoven with those about the quality and extent of services available. 'Services', of course, can encompass a wide range of activities at HE providers, including both formal and informal support mechanisms available to students. Examples include a counselling or welfare service, a more general health service, a funding or financial support service or an academic skills service.

Support services is one area where Parry, Davies and Williams (2004: 18) found a clear distinction between universities and colleges:

In the HEIs, academic and personal support was much more likely to be provided centrally to all students: and there was an impressive array of specialist services available. In the FECs, by contrast, the most common model of support was that offered within the class and as part of normal teaching. External sources of advice and guidance were available, but

⁶³ This situation is likely not helped by the fact that HE in FE staff can also feel removed from partner universities (Rapley, 2014: 205).

most college teachers regarded individual student support as part of their everyday role.

There are two important differences to underline here. First, the authors point to the existence of 'specialist services' at universities that are not necessarily available at colleges. Second, support services at the universities they studied were clearly centralised. While the colleges they researched may have offered similar support services at an institutional level, college teachers reported shouldering some responsibility to offer their students individualised support.

Differences such as these have two clear implications for the student experience. The first one is that although students in both colleges and universities can access support, university students are likely to have a wider range of options for where and how to access it. Therefore, there is less risk of them becoming overly reliant upon particular individuals for advice. The second one is that with more specialist services available, it is presumably easier for university students to seek out expert advice on particular issues if and when they need it.

Given its potential links to students' employment expectations and outcomes, careers information, advice and guidance is one area of support in which these issues with services are especially relevant for this study. Although there is limited information about HE careers advice in colleges generally, there is some evidence that HE students at colleges speak to family and friends more than any other source regarding careers information, advice and guidance; this is in contrast to their counterparts at universities (Purcell et al., 2009: 95). There are a number of reasons why this could be the case, among them that students do not feel they need to visit the careers service, are not interested in

what the careers service has to offer or do not know about their institution's career service.⁶⁴ Indeed, along these lines, attending HE at a college is one characteristic that has been linked to a general lack of awareness of an institution's careers service (Purcell et al., 2009: 99). However, taking the findings mentioned above (from Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004) into account, it is also possible that even where a careers service is available, students feel that they can access the help they need from their tutors. What is less clear from the literature is what influence, if any, college students' experiences of careers information, advice and guidance at their institution has on their employment expectations.

Taken together, the literature available about HE in FE students' experiences in terms of teaching, learning, facilities and services raises some important questions for this study. For the most part, these questions stem from one central issue: the extent to which the college environment is beneficial (or not) for bachelor's degree students. Although students may benefit from certain aspects of the college student experience, such as having close relationships with their fellow students and tutors, there are also potential consequences from being in a college environment, like mixed experiences with access to facilities. Comparing across types of institutions, these differences provide concrete examples of some of the ways in which the college student experience may compare with the university student experience. The next section will explore the extent to which these differences emerge in the literature available about students' post-graduation expectations.

⁶⁴ There is also the possibility that some colleges do not have a careers service.

3.2.3 Post-graduation expectations of HE in FE students

While there is supposedly more information available about graduate employment outcomes than previously, especially with the advent of Key Information Sets (KIS) in 2012,⁶⁵ the data remain limited in both scope and completeness. For example, graduate salary statistics do not always take into account students' prior work experience or the region in which they work, both of which can influence the opportunities available to graduates and their salary averages. In addition, such statistics are sometimes based on surveys with low response rates, meaning they do not necessarily provide an accurate representation of the entire graduate population from a particular qualification, course or institution. Furthermore, even when these data are made available, it cannot be certain that students use them when making decisions about HE. Thus, their employment expectations may be based on little, if any, hard evidence of actual employment outcomes for graduates like them. Though there are plans to further develop the information available about graduate employment outcomes using a new process 'for assess[ing] the employment and earnings returns to education' (Johnson, 2015),⁶⁶ providing this improved data does not inherently mean that students will have clearer or more realistic expectations.

⁶⁵ From September 2012, universities and colleges funded by HEFCE were required to publish KIS. The data within are meant to help students make more informed choices about the course and institution they choose for HE. While these do facilitate comparability between courses and institutions, as of 2016 they mostly provide basic quantitative information rather than in-depth qualitative information.

⁶⁶ This new process, which was announced by Jo Johnson, Universities Minister, in a July 2015 speech, involves 'matching Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and Department for Education (DfE) education data with HMRC employment and income data and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits data' (Johnson, 2015). Johnson (*ibid.*) argues that the resulting 'information will be incredibly useful for young people choosing courses or jobs that are most suitable for them. It will also enable education providers to assess their effectiveness in delivering positive labour market outcomes for their students'.

It might be that additional experience, rather than supplementary information, would bring more clarity to students in this regard. At least two large-scale studies about undergraduate students have found that older students at both colleges and universities have a clearer idea than younger students as to what they would like to do after graduation (Parry et al., 2012: 151-152; Purcell et al., 2009: 117).⁶⁷ There is also some evidence that part-time HE students have more clarity⁶⁸ than full-time HE students (Parry et al., 2012: 151-152), which could be linked to the fact that many part-time students are in employment alongside their course and therefore have a better understanding of the labour market. In addition, it appears that college students generally have more clarity than university students (*ibid.*),⁶⁹ though this difference could partially be attributed to the larger proportions of older and part-time students at colleges compared with universities.

Although the data available do indicate that students' expectations differ based on type of institution, a number of stipulations must be made with regard to students' ages and work experience as well. For the purposes of this study, this conclusion means that students' post-graduation expectations may align more closely with others who are their age or have similar work experience than with others who went to a similar institution.

⁶⁷ While Parry et al.'s (2012) study included students pursuing a range of HE in FE qualifications, Purcell et al. (2009: 74) focused primarily on bachelor's degree students (92 per cent of their sample) and a very small proportion of full-time foundation degree students (4 per cent) and Diploma of Higher Education/HND students (2 per cent). An additional 2 per cent of their respondents either did not give a course title or were not classifiable (*ibid.*).

⁶⁸ A student's degree of 'clarity' refers to where they place themselves 'on a scale of 1-7...where 1 means "I have a clear idea about what I want to do" and 7 means "I have no idea what I want to do"' when considering 'their long-term career and future' (Parry et al., 2012: 151).

⁶⁹ Fifty-five per cent of students in Parry et al.'s (2012: 151) study reported having clarity about their future plans, whereas only 43 per cent of students in Purcell et al.'s (2009) study reported the same (according to Parry et al., 2012: 152. The original data on this point could not be located in Purcell et al., 2009).

3.2.4 Post-graduation outcomes of HE in FE graduates

In order to offer bachelor's degrees, colleges must enter into partnerships (which were described in 2.4) with universities who are willing to validate their qualifications. Essentially, the universities are responsible for ensuring the colleges uphold the quality and standards associated with the English bachelor's degree. In writing about the potential problems of upholding such standards in a mass system, Trow (1987: 221) explains that

the only way a system of higher education marked by very high academic standards throughout can survive is if there stands alongside it—and related to it—a truly mass system of institutions marked by lower per capita costs and lower standards—one that accepts those democratising pressures, demands, and functions, willingly.

In other words, Trow (1987) argues that expecting high academic standards throughout a mass system of HE is unrealistic. In order for these standards to exist in one part, another part will inevitably have 'more diverse standards' (Trow, 1973: 10). Indeed, if all who want to do so are encouraged to go to HE, there must be institutions available to accept students from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances (Clark, 1960). However, such diversification is not necessarily explicitly welcome in a system with high expectations. As Clark (1960: 162) rightly argues, '[w]hile a democratic ethos may set personal ends, the standards of higher education control the means'. Consequently, as Trow (*ibid.*, p. 52) points out, 'the struggle to contain diversity [in a mass system] takes the form of an effort to maintain tight controls over standards, costs, functions, forms, and so forth, all in the service of the traditional values of higher education'.

Part of the thinking behind partnership arrangements is that being taught at a college should, theoretically speaking, be no different than being

taught at a university. Taking this idea forward, it also means that there should not be significant differences in students' outcomes based on type of institution alone. However, it is no secret that some universities are favoured over others by certain employers when it comes to recruiting employees (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011: 93-94); what is less certain is whether universities, as a type of institution, are favoured over colleges.

Since universities validate their degrees, college graduates entering the labour market can theoretically present themselves as university graduates. Yet there is some debate amongst HE in FE students as to whether where they were taught matters to prospective employers. In fact, the students surveyed in Parry et al.'s (2012: 120) study 'were equally divided about whether or not "a degree gained from a university has a higher status than a degree gained from a college"'. While 32 per cent agreed with this statement, 32 per cent also disagreed (ibid.). Divided opinions also emerged in discussion groups with students from the same study:

The lower status of college-based degree was presented very vividly by one student group undertaking a foundation degree who declared they had no intention of telling prospective employers that they had studied for their degree at a college rather than at a university. They were simply going to say they had a degree from the University of X. Another group, studying for a BA in Fine Art, were aware that their college-based degree may have a lower status than a university degree. One group member said that it didn't matter because 'you're still coming out with a degree', but others contended there was a difference, and it mattered (ibid., p. 122).

Therefore, at least in Parry et al.'s (ibid.) sample, there is inconsistency among different groups with regard to whether a university degree is considered 'better' than a college degree. It is understandable why students would be concerned with how their qualifications are perceived given that '[a] degree is

no longer a passport to an automatic, well-paid graduate job' (Morgan, 2011: 8). In other words, they know that a degree is not enough on its own anymore, and other factors, such as where that degree was taught, could potentially make a difference.

However, there is limited research on employers' perceptions of college-based degrees, and whether the type of institution a student attends influences recruitment.⁷⁰ Although there is some evidence that 'the larger private sector organisations—in particular the engineering and technology companies—[recruit] almost always from among the universities, usually from a specific few institutions' (Parry et al., 2012: 165) when hiring bachelor's degree graduates, other types of companies report more varied views as to whether type of institution matters.

One way to uncover whether type of institution makes a difference is to review employment outcomes for bachelor's graduates from colleges with their equivalents from universities. When reviewing data (HEFCE, 2013a: 11)⁷¹ about the destinations of full-time first-degree leavers from universities and FECs, there are two notable differences. First, a higher percentage of university leavers (16 per cent) than college leavers (6 per cent) go on to further study only (as opposed to further study combined with employment). Second, a higher percentage of college leavers are assumed to be unemployed (16 per cent compared to 10 per cent from HEIs). In the two other categories for which percentages are available, there are not substantial differences: 64 per cent of

⁷⁰ There is also very little evidence as to how students actually handle this issue when applying for jobs, though this study contributes some data to this area in 8.2.6.

⁷¹ This is the only publication available from HEFCE that explicitly presents data on the destinations and salary outcomes of HE in FE leavers. Although data has been collected from colleges in the years since, it has not yet been published. Therefore, findings based on the 2010/11 data (which were published in HEFCE, 2013a) are the most up to date available.

college leavers are in employment only compared with 62 per cent of university leavers, and 9 per cent of college leavers are in a combination of employment and further study compared with 8 per cent of university leavers. These data (based on data from 2010/11) do not differ substantially from data in 2008/09 or 2009/10. However, generally speaking, there have been minor changes (3 per cent or less in either direction) in trends over these three years. Slightly fewer students from both types of institution went on to further study in 2010/2011 compared with the previous two years. Furthermore, university leavers in employment increased slightly over time, as did the number of college students assumed to be unemployed.⁷²

In terms of salary, the median salary of FEC leavers for all three years of data listed above was £15,000 (HEFCE, 2013a: 14-15). For university leavers, it decreased from £20,000 in 2008/09 to £19,000 for the next two years. There is reason to believe, though, that some of these differences have to do with subject area and that there might be less of a difference than is given. For example, among business students, there was only a £1,000 difference in the mean salary across type of institution: £18,500 for FEC graduates compared with £19,500 for university graduates. In general, though, university leavers as a group are more likely than college leavers to earn over £20,000 (49 per cent compared to 28 per cent). The most commonly reported salary range from college leavers, which accounted for 37 per cent of them, was between £10,000-£14,999 in 2010/11.

⁷² Data included in this paragraph and the next paragraph can be reviewed in HEFCE (2013a: 11, 14-15). There are also data available therein regarding the destinations and salary outcomes of leavers from FECs and HEIs with qualifications other than the first degree, such as foundation degrees and other undergraduate qualifications. There is also some data therein about part-time first degree leavers.

Although it remains uncertain whether the type of institution a student attends matters to the majority of employers during recruitment, the evidence available does suggest that college graduates with bachelor's degrees are more likely to be unemployed and, if employed, earn less on average than university graduates. For the students in this study, these could be key differences between pursuing HE at a university compared with HE at a college.

3.3 Summarising the empirical literature

The empirical literature available about bachelor's students at colleges is limited and can be difficult to find, making it complicated to compare students in this group with their counterparts at universities. Within the HE in FE literature, much more is available about students pursuing other HE in FE qualifications (such as HNDs or foundation degrees). However, since these students are not pursuing the same qualification as many university undergraduates, their journeys through HE are not necessarily comparable with most university students. In order to effectively compare these two groups, gathering more data about bachelor's students in colleges is essential.

The literature which is available about bachelor's students' decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes reveals a number of gaps in what is known about this group. Although they are similar to university students in terms of why they decide to go to HE, there is not a clear answer as to why they choose to go to a college instead of a university. Research to date indicates that there are multiple reasons, many of which suggest that students are not necessarily choosing a college over a university but rather going to college by default. It is evident from the many studies conducted about students'

transitions between level 5 and level 6 qualifications that progressing from one HE level to another within a college environment is not easy. In fact, many students find the move to bachelor's degree level to be quite stressful; this experience is further compounded for students who must change institutions (as well as levels) in order to complete a top-up year.

HE in FE students experience both benefits and consequences as a result of pursuing HE qualifications in an FE environment. Although they mostly appreciate the small class sizes and supportive atmosphere that comes with studying in a college, some students express a concern that this approach to teaching and learning can hinder their development as independent learners. In a similar vein, because HE students are usually a minority group within their college, the facilities and services available to support them are normally more geared towards FE students.

It is not entirely clear from the literature available whether type of institution influences a bachelor's student's post-graduation expectations. There is some evidence that older students with some work experience tend to have a better idea about what they would like to do after they graduate than younger students or those with no work experience. As many college students fall into the former group, there is reason to believe that college students generally may have clearer expectations than university students. However, this difference could be to do with age and experience rather than type of institution.

Although the data available about post-graduation outcomes for bachelor's students from colleges is limited, there is a general trend that they are more likely to be unemployed than their university counterparts. In

addition, those that are employed are more likely to earn less. The reasons why this is the case are not immediately clear, as there does not seem to be any evidence which indicates that most employers prefer graduates from one type of institution over another.

This literature raises a number of questions to be considered within the context of this study. In particular, there is a need to better understand the extent to which the experiences of HE in FE students pursuing other HE qualifications align with those pursuing bachelor's degrees specifically. Furthermore, more information is needed in order to assess the extent to which the college environment helps or hinders the development of bachelor's students into graduates. Against this background and context, the next two chapters will present the research design and methods used to investigate the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of bachelor's students in colleges in England and how they compare with their university counterparts.

4 METHODOLOGY I: RESEARCH DESIGN AND RATIONALE

This chapter introduces the research designed to answer the questions posed in 1.2 and the rationale for how it was designed. In addition, it provides an overview of the conceptual framework used to make sense of the data collected. After describing the research design, conceptual framework and design rationale, the chapter considers the issues of reliability, validity, generalisability, research ethics and positionality and explains how these were accounted for to ensure the trustworthiness and quality of this research. Finally, the chapter closes by describing the process of using expert interviews to refine the research design. It also explains how the qualification, subject and regions upon which to focus were chosen and discusses the process of developing the research instruments.

4.1 Overview of research design

In describing exploratory research, Stebbins (2001: 6) explains that '[r]esearchers explore when they have little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, activity, or situation they want to examine but nevertheless have reason to believe it contains elements worth discovering'. Furthermore, he proposes that 'to explore effectively a given phenomenon, they must approach it with two special orientations: *flexibility* in looking for data and *open-mindedness* about where to find them' (his emphasis; 2001: 6). Taking this perspective, it is largely *because* there is little comprehensive knowledge about HE in FE that it merits exploration. However, because the shape and scope of this provision is transient, implementing a strict design when researching it puts the researcher at odds with the character of the provision itself. Therefore,

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this study was designed with the aim of striking a balance between the need to be flexible and open-minded with the importance of conducting rigorous, reliable and valid research.

With these considerations in mind, I conducted a predominantly qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with finalists and recent graduates⁷³ and a questionnaire taken by finalists as the primary research methods. I also conducted a series of ten context interviews, eight of which were with subject matter experts and two of which were with HE in FE course leaders at institutions included in the study. These context interviews were intended to enhance my knowledge and understanding of the topic area concerned rather than to gather data for analysis, therefore, data from them are not analysed alongside those gathered from students.

In addition to these data sources, I also used some quantitative data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) through the annual and longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) surveys.⁷⁴ When this research began 2011, I faced a number of limitations when attempting to use this data for comparison between types of institution (an issue explored further in 4.3.3). Although this situation improved following the release of two new reports (Parry et al., 2012 and HEFCE, 2013a), there remain significant gaps in the quantitative information available (in addition to those in the qualitative information available, as described in Chapter 3) about

⁷³ The same sample of students was used for both groups. One round of interviews (henceforth called 'pre-graduation interviews') was conducted during students' final year and the second round of interviews (henceforth called 'post-graduation interviews') was conducted within the year after student participants graduated.

⁷⁴ The DLHE is conducted on an annual and longitudinal basis and gathers information about what graduates are doing (further study, part-time work, full-time work, etc.) and earning six months (for the annual version) and three and a half years (for the longitudinal version) after graduation.

this provision, thereby making direct comparison between types of institution difficult.

The decision to conduct a predominantly qualitative study was based primarily on the suitability of this approach for the questions asked and secondarily on the lack of substantial quantitative data to use for statistical analysis. With regard to the suitability of these methods for answering the research questions, the first research question focuses on why students have made particular decisions and how they make sense of those decisions. Similarly, the fourth question sought to understand how students envision their future and subsequently assess how their *actual* employment outcomes compare with their *expected* employment outcomes. Both of these questions, therefore, deal with issues that must be *explained* rather than *measured*. Put another way, I was interested in the *meaning* of their decisions and expectations rather than simply their *behaviour* (Bryman, 2008: 394). Uniquely, answering the second question required both *explaining* the more abstract aspects of the student experience (i.e. what the student likes and does not like about their course/institution) and *measuring* the more concrete aspects (i.e. the number of hours students spend in lectures/seminars each week). While the interviews and questionnaire provided some data to answer the third question, answering it also called for more extensive quantitative data (particularly in terms of salary scales). Hence, data from the aforementioned DLHE surveys, as well as that available from Parry et al. (2012) and HEFCE (2013a) supplemented the qualitative data collected to answer this question.

In terms of content, the pre-graduation interview schedule (available in 12.1.3.2) and questionnaire (available in 12.1.4), both of which were used as

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research instruments during students' final year of undergraduate study, covered related topics but in different amounts of detail.⁷⁵ The topics common to both included exploring students' reasons for pursuing HE, applying to their institution, choosing their course, the structure of their course, fees and debt levels, employment status and employment expectations, among other topics. However, whereas the interviews focused in particular on encouraging students to discuss and reflect upon their experiences at different stages of their HE journey, the questionnaire generally collected more demographic and quantitatively comparable information. The post-graduation interviews, which took place up to one year after students graduated with bachelor's degrees, covered students' activities (employment-related or otherwise) since graduation, their experience of applying for jobs or further study, their transition experience into work or further study after graduation and reflections on the usefulness of their degree course.

Despite the fact that the interview and questionnaire covered similar topics, three differences between the two influenced the data they elicited. One of the biggest differences between them was the prescriptive nature of the questionnaire. For example, rather than asking an open question regarding why a student decided to enter higher education, the questionnaire gave a selection of reasons from which the student could tick all that applied. Although an 'Other' option was available, which allowed a student to enter their own reason if needed, this option was rarely selected.

⁷⁵ Since the pre-graduation interviews and questionnaire ran alongside each other, they collected data at a similar point in the student experience.

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Another noticeable difference, which did not become apparent until I started conducting the pre-graduation interviews, is the ease with which the questionnaire could tease apart a student's decision-making process compared with my ability to do this during the interviews. When interviewing students, I found they interpreted the question 'Could you tell me how you decided to do this course?' very differently, whereas the questionnaire explicitly asked for the separate reasons behind a student's decision to pursue HE, choose their institution and choose their course/subject. Varying interpretations of this question sometimes happened even within the same interview,⁷⁶ where one student would answer by focusing on how they decided to do a bachelor's top-up year and the other student focusing on how they chose business as a subject. Indeed, this is one of the primary reasons why interviews were necessary; they allowed me to explore in depth the separate strands involved in students' decision-making in order to better understand the influence of various factors on different aspects of their choices.

Finally, the questionnaire covered students' job-seeking strategies in much more detail than was possible during the interviews. The time constraints faced during the interviews (described further in 5.1.4.1) meant that certain topics were sometimes not covered in optimum detail. Due to the fact that many of the pre-graduation interviews took place nearly six months before students graduated, it was often more fruitful to extensively cover their student experience instead of focusing on job-seeking strategies. Therefore, the

⁷⁶ I conducted some interviews with pairs of students rather than individually, therefore, it was straightforward to see when students interpreted the same question differently.

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data gathered on this topic through the questionnaire proved to be valuable due to the lower amount of it collected through the pre-graduation interviews.

When I encountered the lack of previous research directly comparing students at colleges with those at universities, I considered using a grounded theory approach based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967, 2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) for analysing data from my study. However, as Luker (2010: 207) suggests, while grounded theory can be used to study the actions and interactions of individuals, these behaviours take place within ‘a social, political, and institutional context that often seems to fade out at the edges in some grounded theory work’. During my fieldwork, it became evident that the study population’s context would not only be relevant but inextricably linked to their understanding of their experience.

One clear illustration of this link can be seen through the influence an institution’s university partner can have on the experiences of HE in FE students. For example, some of the students interviewed at one college in this study criticised the lecture materials they sometimes received from the college’s partner university. As Nick explained,

there was definitely a mix [of styles] you could literally see. You can begin with your slides [from the college] and there’d be references here there and everywhere, and then you’d get to a set from [the partner university] and it was so sort of sparse in comparison you know and brief.

Nick, 31-year old male HE in FE student

Since this institution occasionally used slides provided by their partner university, students were able to critique what the partner university offered. However, at institutions where partnerships were less visible, students could not reflect on what their partner university offered in the same way. Therefore, their institutional context influenced their understanding of HE in FE as an

experience. Taking examples like this one into consideration, I decided that using a grounded theory approach, even simply for analysis, would have been inappropriate and limiting. Consequently, I developed my own conceptual framework (described in depth in the next section) by drawing together some of the key concepts that can be used to explore how HE students' experiences compare across different institutions.

4.2 Conceptual framework: the 'figured world' of HE in FE

Holland et al. (1998: 52) use the concept of a 'figured world' to describe

a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents...who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state...as moved by a specific set of forces.

This concept can be used to explore how a person's identity transforms as he or she, over time, embodies (or moves away from) a figured world through continued participation in it. Depending on the extent to which an individual embodies a figured world, the agents, changes of state and forces relevant to it develop more or less salience for the individual's identity. In other words, the more a person embodies a particular figured world, the more meaning this world has in the person's identity.

This concept is a helpful one to use when exploring HE in FE for two reasons. When using it at the macro level, HE can be examined as a culturally constructed figured world rather than a concept bound to a particular type of institution (i.e. universities). This understanding presents the possibility of investigating how institutional culture influences the local figured world of HE and how the relevant agents, changes of state and forces compare across types

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of institution. At the micro level, conceptualising HE as a figured world in which students participate at varying levels of embodiment enables deeper exploration of the wide range of HE experiences described by HE in FE students. However, the concept of the figured world on its own is not sufficient for understanding the complexity of the HE student journey within colleges and universities in England. Including the interrelated concepts of boundaries, identity and culture is also necessary. Together, these concepts allow exploration of how HE in FE students navigate the boundary between HE and FE within an FE culture and how this journey shapes their identity as graduates. For comparative purposes, a similar model can be used to explore how the culture of an HE institution, and its lack of an internal HE/FE boundary, shapes university students' identities as graduates.

The concept of boundaries is particularly important when investigating HE in FE in England because, as evidenced in Chapter 2, the line between the two is often used to justify policy-related decisions without being clearly defined. Consequently, it is useful to consider Barth's (1969) argument that different groups (or in this case, types of education) are best understood by exploring the boundaries between them rather than the characteristics, behaviours and traditions of the groups themselves. In his words, '[t]he critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses' (Barth, 1969: 15). Although Barth (1969) wrote about these ideas from the perspective of a social anthropologist, a similar model based on this reasoning can be applied when investigating HE in FE. Like different cultural groups, these two types of education also interact across a boundary. Resources such as students, funding

and staff regularly flow between the two, despite the fact that those resources might have originally been intended for one sector and not the other. Notwithstanding their interaction, they remain separate entities, and their separation is only further entrenched the more the two interact. In other words, 'differentiation is maintained as [they] come into contact with each other' (Hernes, 2004: 11).

Yet at the institutional level, FE and HE can either become increasingly differentiated or conflated depending on how the institution operationalises the boundary between the two. These two possibilities are clearly evidenced when reviewing research about dual-sector institutions in particular. According to Garrod and Macfarlane (2009: xiii), such institutions (called 'dual-sector' or 'comprehensive' depending on their country) supposedly aim to 'bridge the boundary' between FE and HE. However, the reality is often not as neat as this metaphor implies.

In exploring the boundaries between HE and FE within a dual-sector institution, Burns (2007) concluded that 'the setting of boundaries [contributes] to creating spheres that are "FE", at the omission of something that...HE students and their lecturer recognise and expect' (Burns, 2007: 9). Hence, even though HE in FE students and lecturers might engage in what is *called* HE, they have a sense that 'something' is missing within the FE institutional context. In this example, the 'something' missing ranged from the more concrete, such as the lack of designated car parking facilities for HE students, to the more abstract, such as HE students being subjected to the same rules as FE students. Consequently, 'a conflict emerge[d] between what [students] expect[ed] to see as constituting HE and what [was] made available'

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(Burns, 2007: 9). From the students' perspective, rather than FE and HE being clearly defined in practice, they were almost indistinguishable from each other except in terminology.

Conversely, other research focusing on the FE/HE divide within a dual-sector institution found that

the strong boundaries between FE and HE within the institution mean[t] that staff and courses [were] positioned in FE or HE, requiring students to negotiate the gap between these two “worlds” just as they would if they moved to a different institution (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009: 129).

Therefore, in this institution, FE and HE functioned as entirely different systems with separate cultures of teaching and learning. Rather than the boundary being bridged or being unclear, it was strictly enforced. The contrast between these two institutions (the one in Burns' research and the one in Bathmaker and Thomas's) demonstrates how differently the boundary between HE and FE can be enacted. Clearly, students pursuing HE in each of these institutions will have vastly different experiences of HE from each other and from students at universities, where this boundary might not exist at all.

Crucially, this boundary between FE and HE is not simply a divide between two types of education; it is also a divide between two different educational cultures. In writing about the culture of education, Bruner (1996: xiv-x) argues that '[h]ow one conceives of education...is a function of how one conceives of the culture and its aims, professed and otherwise'. In other words, education must be examined in relation to its surrounding community and the goals of that community. Since the institutional aims of universities and colleges differ, it follows that so will their educational cultures.

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For example, one of the key ‘forces’ relevant to the figured world of HE within universities is knowledge production; the link between knowledge production and universities dates back to the roots of universities themselves. For example, in the twelfth century, the University of Bologna ‘was legally declared a place where research could develop independently of any other power’ (University of Bologna, 2014).⁷⁷ This declaration established the university as a body with a particular role in society intrinsically linked to being at the forefront of research. This role persists today in England through the institutional hierarchy of HE institutions (Bathmaker et al., 2007) and the fact that those at the top are referred to as *research* (not teaching) universities. Furthermore, debates such as that about whether FE lecturers can deliver HE without being engaged in ‘scholarly activity’ demonstrates that an involvement with knowledge production is central to our understanding of HE (West, 2006; Feather, 2010).

According to Gewirtz and Cribb (2009: 9-10), higher education today maintains

intrinsic educational importance because it is a key site of knowledge production and provides an opportunity for (predominantly young) people to be inducted into the cultures and practices of knowledge production. In other words, it is centrally concerned with making, using and sharing the tools that enable us to understand – and change – the world.

Thus, if HE is defined, at least in part, by its culture of knowledge production, it makes sense to question whether colleges (especially those in which the boundary between FE and HE is conflated) can deliver ‘authentic’ HE and subsequently produce ‘authentic’ graduates. The reason for questioning their

⁷⁷ This quote from the University of Bologna (2014) also clearly demonstrates links between the origins of universities and academic freedom; however, this aspect of university culture is not the focus here.

ability to train graduates is not because colleges are incapable of offering HE, but because their goals as institutions are not centred on knowledge production, which means their culture is not geared towards initiating students into the research community.

This could be one reason why, as Young (2012: 2) points out, ‘much of the debate about FE/HE boundaries is couched in terms of either social justice or efficiency or both’. Equality of opportunity through increased access to HE does not necessarily equal equality of outcomes (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007). Access to HE is not simply about having access to a higher qualification; it is also linked to the process of knowledge production and having access to a particular type of knowledge. In this vein, Wheelahan (2010: 145) argues that ‘access to abstract theoretical knowledge’, such as that traditionally provided in universities, ‘is an issue of distributional justice because society uses it to conduct its conversation about what it should be like’. Those who are typically excluded from such debates must be given access to this knowledge, otherwise ‘they will always be on the outside looking in, largely excluded from society’s conversation about what it should be like’ (Wheelahan, 2010: 163). Therefore, an institution’s culture and the foci of that culture have significant ramifications for students’ identity development and their eventual power to participate in society and its larger discussions.

In discussing the influence of culture on individuals’ development, Bruner (1996: x) argues that ‘culture shapes mind, that it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of our selves and our powers’. The ‘toolkit’ provided by culture includes ‘techniques and procedures for understanding and managing your world’

(Bruner, 1996: 98). If HE in FE students are not provided with the same tools as HE students at universities, it follows that their identity development will differ significantly. This discrepancy could have significant implications for their future. As Holland et al. (1998: 5) explain,

[i]dentities are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being.

Hence, the influence of institutional culture on who these students become as graduates is essential to take into account.

Thus the issues of how the figured world of HE differs between colleges and universities, how the cultural boundary between FE and HE is enacted within FECs, and the consequences these matters have for students' identity development are fundamental to this research. As such, the concepts of the figured world, boundaries, culture and identity played integral roles in analysing the data gathered through the student interviews and questionnaire (as is evidenced in the description of the coding process in 5.2.1).

4.3 Design rationale

4.3.1 Why semi-structured interviews?

As previously mentioned, the decision to conduct a predominantly qualitative study was based primarily on the suitability of this approach for the questions asked and secondarily on the lack of substantial quantitative data mentioned above. Additionally, it was evident from the start of this research that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to generate hypotheses, an essential feature of quantitative research (Hoy, 2010: 1), which could be reliably tested in a field of such widespread and varied provision.

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Although there are aspects of the answers to the research questions which are quantifiable, such as a student's salary expectations and outcomes, this information is not used for 'the generation of models and theories that explain behaviour', as it would be in purely quantitative research (Hoy, 2010: 1). In fact, rather than simply seeking to understand behaviour, or *what* students have done, the interest here is in the *why* behind what they have done (Bryman, 2008: 394). Therefore, qualitative interviews were essential '[b]ecause of the possibility of enquiring openly about situational meanings or motives for action, or collecting everyday theories and self-interpretations in a differentiated and open way' (Hopf, 2004: 202).

In comparison with fully structured or unstructured interviews, using semi-structured interviews offered the ability to cover a predetermined list of topics with the flexibility to adjust the time spent on each depending on the interviewee (Robson, 2002: 208). In conducting semi-structured interviews with experts, different topics clearly resonated with different people; therefore, having the ability to adjust accordingly allowed deeper exploration of the interviewees' particular areas of interest or expertise. Similarly, the students and course leaders interviewed had more to say about certain topics, and sometimes they were more comfortable discussing certain subjects over others. Hence, maintaining this flexibility was important regardless of the age, background, or previous interview experience of the interviewee.

4.3.2 Why a questionnaire?

There were two main reasons for including a questionnaire in addition to the semi-structured interviews. First, it allowed for triangulation, which Flick

(2007: 43-44) argues can be used 'for extending the knowledge we want to obtain in our study' when 'one methodological approach is not enough'. In addition to permitting access to a wider range of participants, thus providing the opportunity to confirm or challenge findings from the interviews, using a questionnaire meant a broader range of information could be gathered about specific topics. For example, the questionnaire included a section (see question 41 in 12.1.4) in which students were asked how useful they found particular sources when looking for employment (e.g. local press, Job Centre, internet vacancy websites, etc.), which was something not addressed in as much detail during interviews. Second, on a practical level, because it was not always necessary to travel to institutions in order to distribute the questionnaire, it offered access to more participants at a lower cost, both in terms of time and money, than adding additional interviewees.

4.3.3 Why data from the DLHE?

For further triangulation, I also used data from the aforementioned DLHE survey. While it provides comprehensive information about the employment outcomes for students from HEIs, the comparable data available for students who completed HE qualifications at FECs is limited. Two particular limitations are relevant to this research. First, HESA did not include data in the DLHE from FECs directly funded by HEFCE until 2008/09. Therefore, the information about HE in FE graduates before that academic year is both sparse and difficult to tease out. Reviewing this data has now become easier with the release of HEFCE's (2013a) report entitled *Destinations of leavers from higher education in further education colleges* (henceforth HE in FE DLHE), however,

there are still notable issues with the information provided therein. For example, the response rate from 2010/11 HE in FE qualifiers was only 61 per cent (14,210 responses out of a potential 23,275) compared with a 75.4 per cent response rate for the DLHE the same year. Also, as of 2016, the original HE in FE DLHE (published in 2013 using data from 2010/11) remains the most up to date available.

Second, it is not clear in the DLHE data (at least that which was available when designing the study) which graduates were franchised students, who technically count as HE in FE graduates. Although the data provided in the HE in FE DLHE makes a clearer distinction between university graduates and HE in FE graduates (both franchised and non-franchised), for a more complete picture and understanding, it was necessary to supplement these sources with additional data (such as from Rashid et al., 2011 or Parry et al., 2012).

4.3.4 Ensuring trustworthiness and quality

4.3.4.1 Reliability

As this study was predominantly qualitative, reliability is more concerned with ‘confirmability’ rather than ‘replicability’ of the findings (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 270). Therefore, I have ensured that this thesis clearly explains how the data were collected and how I analysed and drew conclusions from them, as another researcher should (theoretically) be able to reach similar conclusions using the same data collection and analysis processes.

4.3.4.2 Validity

I also considered how to ensure the study’s validity, or that ‘the findings are “really” about what they appear to be about’ and are ‘accurately reflecting

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the phenomena under study as perceived by the study population' (Robson, 2002: 93; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 274). To this end, I made four provisions. First, the expert interviews conducted (described in 4.4.1) allowed me the opportunity to ask questions about the relevant issues in this topic area before carrying out fieldwork. For example, because most of the experts interviewed were working in and/or researching HE in FE when the binary divide was eliminated in 1992, they had more in-depth, experiential knowledge about the impact of this division on universities and colleges than I could gather simply from reading the literature. In a similar fashion, I later also used the aforementioned interviews with two course leaders to triangulate my interviews with students. These interviews allowed me the opportunity to confirm and/or contradict students' impressions of why certain decisions had been made during their course.

Second, I used questions in the research instruments (both the interview schedule and questionnaire) that had been tested in previous studies (the development of the research instruments will be discussed further in 4.4.3). Third, at the end of each interview, I gave interviewees the opportunity to comment on any topics or issues we had not covered that they thought might be relevant to the research. I also followed up with interviewees after reviewing their interview transcripts regarding any areas where clarification of their views was needed before analysis. In addition, the questionnaire had spaces available for participants to expand their answers so they were not restricted to the choices I gave them. Finally, I used multiple data collection methods, as explained above in 4.1, to help me confirm whether particular findings were specific to one type of data collection. Since making the process

of analysis explicit is essential to both reliability and validity, I also kept detailed notes on the development of my coding framework (see 12.2 for two examples of how the framework developed and the final coding framework) and my use of particular codes.

4.3.4.3 Generalisability

As will be introduced later in this chapter, this study focused on one subject area, one qualification and a small sample of students from six institutions in two regions of England; it is therefore limited in its scope for generalisation. Additionally, as this research was conducted for a Doctor of Philosophy degree, there were time constraints to be considered in terms of data collection and the financial resources available were also limited. Furthermore, due to ‘the wide variation in the size and pattern of activity’ within HE in FE, ‘[g]eneralisation on the basis of this heterogeneity is difficult and unwise’ (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 2). Despite these limitations, within the subject and qualification parameters defined by the study, inferential generalisation might be possible across different institutions (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 267-268). In other words, other students pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business at institutions similar to those included in this study might be influenced by similar factors in making their decisions about HE, and subsequently have comparable experiences, expectations and outcomes to those from the institutions included.

4.3.4.4 Ethical considerations

In preparation for the ethical approval process, I completed the online research ethics training course available through the University of Oxford’s

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Research Skills Toolkit in January 2012. I submitted Form CUREC/1A (available in 12.1.1) on 24 February 2012 and received ethical approval for my research on 14 March 2012. To ensure the continued ethical integrity of my research, I agreed in my CUREC to abide by the 2011 British Educational Research Association's (BERA) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* throughout the course of my research (BERA, 2011). I also completed a Fieldwork Risk and Safety Assessment form, which was approved by the Department of Education on 26 June 2012.

Though I do not think there was a great physical risk for my research participants, I do recognise the emotional risks they took when speaking to me about their decisions, experiences, and expectations and whether those expectations were met. Therefore, in order to 'minimize risks of harm or discomfort' (Israel and Hay, 2006: 95) to participants throughout my study, all participants (experts, course leaders and students) were given a participant information sheet (see 12.1.5.1 for the sheet given to experts and course leaders and 12.1.5.2 for the one given to students) and allowed to ask questions or clarify details about the research before signing a consent form (available in 12.1.5.3). Both the information sheet and consent form made it clear that participants had the right to terminate participation at any point. Questionnaire participants were reminded of their rights on the first page of the questionnaire (available in 12.1.4) and asked to tick a box indicating they had read both of these documents (the participation information sheet and consent form) and were willing to participate on the basis of the terms and conditions contained therein. These measures ensured, as stipulated by the BERA guidelines, that participants gave their informed consent to participate and were aware of their

right to withdraw at any time (BERA, 2011: 6). Additionally, all experts, institutions, course leaders and students included in the study were offered anonymity and have therefore been given code numbers and/or pseudonyms.

4.3.4.5 Positionality

Clearly, I was an outsider at every institution I visited during the course of this research. During fieldwork, two aspects of my outsider status seemed to garner the interest of my participants. A third aspect was present on my mind throughout the fieldwork, though it did not seem to concern them.

First, as an American, my accent (and, following from that, my nationality) meant that I instantly stood out in the institutions I visited. Many of the students I interviewed told me they rarely met people outside of their region of England, let alone someone from a different country. In fact, at one of the more remote institutions I visited, I was repeatedly told what an 'exotic' accent I had by everyone from the receptionist to the principal. During interviews, some of the students even used phrases they had learned from American television because they thought this would help me understand what they were saying (e.g. using the phrase 'trailer park' rather than 'caravan park'). I often found my accent gave me the opportunity to 'ask probing and even silly or stupid questions', which helped me build a better rapport with the students during the course of the interview (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002: 212). Students were also curious as to what extent my personal undergraduate experience reflected the portrayal of university life in popular American films. Therefore, in some cases, they repeated some of my own interview questions back to me in order to learn more about how my experience compared with theirs.

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Interestingly, one of the two international students who participated as interviewees in my study also shared that being from another country made her feel special at the college: *'I'm a bit more special in a place where there's less people like me'* (Fleur, 23-year-old female HE in FE student). While I would not necessarily say that I felt 'special', I certainly felt noticeable for being different.

This aspect of my outsider status also emerged during my expert interviews. Almost all of the experts at some point suggested that this research would be, to a certain extent, ethnographic due to my perspective as a foreigner looking in on a different culture and educational system. In fact, one of the experts interviewed advised me to remember that one of the most valuable contributions of this work would be my perspective as an outsider:

you've got the great advantage of being an outsider. And I would encourage you to remain an outsider...don't get over-socialised by English dominant ideas (Expert 4, 2012).

I found this to be valuable advice, and it expanded my horizons when it came to constructing the conceptual framework for this research. In particular, I implemented some conceptual ideas used by ethnographers from social anthropology (e.g. Barth, 1969), which I might not have explored were it not for my outsider status.

In both cases, with the students and the experts, I found the interviewees helpfully explained the basics of the English educational system in more detail than they might have done if I was 'from around here'. This was particularly the case when it came to discussing tuition fees and student loans, which sparked a lot of conversation with students, in particular when they learned how much my American undergraduate degree cost (approximately £70,000).

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Second, my association with Oxford fascinated many of the student interviewees. During a number of the interviews, the students asked me what Oxford is ‘really’ like and sought to prove or dispel rumours they had heard about the university and how its students are taught. Additionally, on more than one occasion I had students ask ‘why are you interested in us’ or ‘what are you doing all the way up/out here?’ This sentiment often led to them approaching the interview in one of two interesting ways. Some of them treated the interview as a platform from which to express their views about a wide range of national HE issues because they had me there as a ready-made ‘expert’ audience who was interested in what they had to say. On one memorable occasion, one student expressed how grateful she was about this research being done:

I'm really glad you're doing something like this because I don't think that [the government] ask enough people that are actually in the situation like at the university—they think they know what they're doing because like when they went [to university] it was like this, but they should be asking people like us what it's like and if we need the help, not deciding for themselves what's going on because they already have jobs and have done it all.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

In other instances, students saw our time together as an opportunity to ask for education and career advice from someone who is ‘not your typical Oxford student’⁷⁸ but had somehow ‘made it there’.

Finally, though the students never mentioned it, I was always aware of the fact that I do not have a background in business or business education. Although I completed one year of a business course at the beginning of my undergraduate degree, my knowledge about the content of such courses was

⁷⁸ When I probed to find out exactly what this meant, I was told I neither looked nor sounded like I was in any way associated with Oxford.

limited until I began researching them as part of my doctorate. I learned a lot as I went along about what is normally included in business courses, the competences students are expected to have upon completing them and the types of jobs they would like to have and end up obtaining. Consequently, this facet of my positionality diminished the further along I was in my research.

4.4 Refining and developing the research design

4.4.1 Expert interviews

Due to the complexity involved in researching this area, it was evident from the start that using the literature alone to design the study could lead to overlooking certain aspects of it. Consequently, between March and April 2012, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with eight expert interviewees (two were interviewed together) in order to better orientate myself to this research topic (particularly the FE aspect of it, since my research background was in HE); develop a more complete understanding of the topic from different perspectives; and uncover any former or current issues about HE in FE of which I might not be aware. With these aims in mind, I conducted interviews with two former FEC principals; one current FEC principal; one current FEC assistant principal; two policy researchers; one former policy researcher; and one academic (see 12.1.2 for expert interviewee codes). As will be discussed further in 4.4.1.1, these interviews came to play an integral role in the process of refining and further developing my research design. They also formed the basis of a later book chapter (Ertl and Allen, 2014) presenting some of the key issues that emerged during the interviews.

In contrast with biographical interviews, during expert interviews, ‘the interviewees are of less interest as a (whole) person than their capacities as experts for a certain field of activity’ (Flick, 2009: 165). As such, interviewees were selected via purposive sampling. Although this sampling strategy does not typically lead to a representative sample and generalisable data, ‘the concern is to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 157). Therefore, I chose individuals who could provide helpful information given their experience and subject knowledge.

Although the overall structure of the expert interviews was similar, I tailored the questions for each interviewee based on what I knew about their background and, if relevant, their research. Each interview began with a discussion of the interviewee’s current and former employment situation, followed by questions about the present state of HE in FE, and finally culminated with questions about the interviewee’s future projections and recommendations for HE in FE (see 12.1.3.1 for a sample interview schedule).⁷⁹

4.4.1.1 Analysing the expert interviews

In order to analyse the data gathered during expert interviews, I reviewed my notes from all seven interviews and partially transcribed the five interviews that were recorded. Due to the exploratory nature of these interviews, I only transcribed sections which were ‘useful or relevant’ for the topic at hand (Bryman, 2008: 455). Although this strategy reduced the amount

⁷⁹ Each expert interview schedule varied slightly depending on an individual’s experience and expertise. The schedule included is a general example of the structure and topics covered.

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of data available for analysis, it was in line with the intended purpose of the interviews, which was to facilitate an in-depth discussion about a particular topic. I also found it useful to reflect on Richards' (2009: 12) delineation of purpose, goal and outcome when analysing these interviews, as this kept the focus on using them in a descriptive way rather than jumping to the abstract or theoretical level when reviewing them.

As the questions for each interviewee were similar, I originally developed the following categories for coding (which reflect the topics covered in the interview schedule):

1. HE in FE courses
2. HE in FE funding
3. HE in FE students
4. HE in FE staff
5. HE in FE strategy/challenges

After reviewing the transcriptions and notes from the interviews, it became evident that five additional categories were needed to capture additional recurring themes:

6. Relationships/partnerships between HEIs and FEIs
7. The purpose/role of HE/FEIs
8. The purpose/role of FE/FEIs
9. The history of HE in FE in England
10. Research methodology (i.e. discussing my planned methodology)

Following this initial review, I read each set of notes or transcription three times and indicated where the expert discussed each of these topics. Upon completing this process, I felt I had gained a substantial overview of the topic from different perspectives and learned more about many of the major past and present issues involved in the provision of HE in FE. From the combination of these interviews and my initial reading of the literature, I also had a sense of some of the differences that existed between the HE journeys of HE in FE

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students and their university counterparts. At the very least, I knew where to start with my questions for them.

In addition to providing this overview, the data gathered during these interviews influenced my work in three key ways. First, taken together, the perspectives of the eight interviewees gave me a deeper understanding of HE in FE than I had previously gained from simply reading the available literature. The former and current college principals provided a general sense of what colleges are like as institutions and how HE operates within them. Moreover, these individuals explained the relative importance of HE within the wider strategic vision at their respective colleges and the challenges their institutions face as HE providers. Out of all the experts, I gained the clearest understanding of what HE in FE students and their experiences might be like from them. The policy researchers, who were interviewed together, and the former policy researcher added a helpful layer of information between the research literature and the more 'on-the-ground' experience from this group of principals. More specifically, they offered opinions about the commonalities and anomalies amongst colleges in terms of HE in FE staff; students; subject areas; and funding. They also gave me a fundamental understanding of the impact policy can have when its consequences trickle down to the level of institutions and their students. Finally, my interview with the academic helped me learn more about the underlying social class issues and overarching policy decisions which have contributed to the current state of HE in FE in England.

Second, in addition to providing valuable information about the history and current state of HE in FE, the expert interviewees also provided helpful feedback on my proposed methodology. The former policy researcher and

academic in particular helped me achieve a more focused research design through making valuable suggestions as to how to account for the complexity of HE in FE provision. Broadly speaking, both focused their feedback on the importance of choosing comparable institutions and courses. For example, the former policy researcher recommended selecting post-92 universities to compare with colleges as these institutions were likely to be competing for similar students. Further to this, the academic recommended choosing one subject and one qualification and building out (if needed) from there, which would make it easier to select institutions for comparison. The academic also pointed out the importance of taking funding arrangements into account when selecting courses and ensuring that those selected were funded by HEFCE (either directly or indirectly) rather than the SFA.⁸⁰ Further to this point, the academic discussed sampling issues I might face when recruiting students, largely due to the wide range of backgrounds present in the HE in FE students, and how I might account for them. Both of these experts also discussed the lack of data available,⁸¹ which is an issue the academic in particular described in detail when we discussed the limitations of the DLHE data (which were explained in 4.3.3).

Third, speaking to these experts led to some subsequent snowball sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 158). In other words, this initial group of contacts helped connect me with other people and resources within their networks who then also influenced my research in three ways. Firstly,

⁸⁰ The HE funded by the SFA is typically related to highly specialised niche qualifications. Therefore, the HE in FE qualifications funded by HEFCE are more comparable to HE at universities.

⁸¹ In addition to the lack of data mentioned here and above in section 3.2, this issue is also discussed in Ertl and Allen (2014: 318).

these additional links were particularly important when it came to designing my research instruments. For example, the academic expert interviewee recommended I speak to a colleague about my questionnaire, and a questionnaire previously designed by this colleague eventually became part of the foundation for mine (the development of the questionnaire for this study is outlined in 4.4.3.3). Second, I also had the opportunity, through follow-up correspondence with the policy researchers, to read policy reports written about the development of HE in FE from a staff perspective as well as survey results from questionnaires distributed to college administrators. Third, I gained access to personal insight, people and documents that I do not believe I would have necessarily come across without the input of the expert interviewees. Their contributions were invaluable to the progress of my learning and my research itself, especially when it came to overcoming the challenges associated with finding and accessing HE in FE literature (as described in 3.1).

4.4.2 Selecting qualification, subject, and regions for focus

4.4.2.1 Choosing the bachelor's degree qualification

In order to control for some of the complexities in this sector, and taking the experts' advice into account, I chose to focus on one qualification in one subject in two regions of England.⁸² In deciding which qualification, subject, and regions to choose, I relied on two invaluable sources of data: a table from HESA about qualifications awarded in England (HESA, 2012b) and HEFCE's set of *Regional profiles on higher education*, which were released annually from

⁸² Although I originally set out to focus on one region, I expanded to two after encountering difficulty when recruiting institutions (5.1.1 describes the process of recruiting institutions).

1999 until 2012 with the exception of 2008, 2009, and 2011 (HEFCE, 1999b; 2000c; 2001; 2002; 2004a; 2004b; 2005; 2006; 2007b; 2010b; 2012c).⁸³

I began narrowing my field of focus by selecting a type of qualification to study, for which I primarily used the HESA data. Since 'higher education' technically begins at level 4 in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (as described in QAA, 2008), my options included Higher National Certificates (HNCs, level 4), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs, level 5), foundation degrees (level 5) and baccalaureate (or bachelor's) degrees (level 6). Since there are limited examples of HNCs, HNDs and foundation degrees being taught at universities, I chose to focus on bachelor's degrees. However, it is important to note that the majority of HE in FE provision is sub-baccalaureate (Parry et al., 2012: 95). Furthermore, it proved difficult to find examples of colleges teaching an entire bachelor's degree from start to finish. More typically, they offer a bachelor's top-up year (level 6) to students who have progressed within the college from level 5 qualifications. Therefore, I chose to focus on students who were either in the final year of a bachelor's degree at a university or completing a top-up year at an FE college.

Although nationally the number of bachelor's students taught in FECs (24,995 as of 2009/10 according to Parry et al., 2012: 63)⁸⁴ is significantly

⁸³ Due to the three years in which the profiles were not published, the 2010 and 2012 editions of these profiles present data that was at least two years old at the time of publication. The 2010 profiles use data from 2007/08 and the 2012 profiles use data from 2009/10. Therefore, I was reviewing data from 2009/10 when using these profiles at the beginning of my research. As far as I am aware, there is no edition available that uses data from 2008/09.

⁸⁴ Data from 2009/10 was the most up to date available when Parry's report was written and was the data I used when designing my study. The most recent data available from HESA (which, as of the 2012/13 academic year, began including some HE in FE summary statistics in its annual Statistical First Release) indicates that as of the 2014/15 academic year, there were 22,060 bachelor's degree students attending FECs compared with 1,251,375 bachelor's degree students attending universities (only including students in England) (HESA, 2016).

smaller than the number taught in universities (1,159,130 as of 2009/10 according to Parry et al., 2012: 63), it is essential to remember that a 'significant' HE provider in the FE sector only has a minimum of 500 HE students (Expert 3, 2012). While the largest providers have over 4,000 HE students, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the smallest providers have fewer than 100 (Parry et al., 2012: 12). In fact, the majority of FECs who are HE providers have between 100-500 students (Parry et al., 2012: 66). Therefore, it was evident from the start that while it would be possible to find enough FECs offering bachelor's courses to complete my study, the number of students at each would inevitably vary. Furthermore, it was clear that the cohort size in terms of number of students would likely be larger at the universities in my study than at the colleges.

4.4.2.2 Choosing Business and Administrative Studies

The aforementioned HESA data also informed my subject selection. After considering a range of subjects including Creative Arts and Design, Education, Engineering and Technology, Nursing, and Social Studies (all of which had relatively substantial numbers of students completing HE qualifications at colleges compared with other subjects), I eventually chose Business and Administrative Studies⁸⁵ for four reasons. First, it accounts for nearly 15 per cent of all HE students in England (not including Open University students or distance learners), making it the overall most popular HE subject in the country (HEFCE, 2012c). Second, it is the subject area which awarded the

⁸⁵ Business and Administrative Studies is defined according to HESA's Joint Academic Coding System (HESA, 2011). The primary stipulation in course selection was that the course had to offer a bachelor's degree with an 'N' classification (as 'N' is the designator for Business and Administrative Studies).

most undergraduate qualifications in 2009/2010 and 2010/2011, which were the two most recent years of data available when choosing the focus of my study (HESA, 2012b). In terms of absolute numbers, out of a total 510,385 undergraduate qualifications awarded in England in 2010/11, 72,955 of these were in business (HESA, 2012b). Third, it was the most popular subject for HE in FE in 2009/10, accounting for 24 per cent of all HE in FE students. Finally, it is one of the more evenly gender balanced subjects across all undergraduate HE qualifications awarded, which I felt could be an important factor when comparing employment outcomes. For example, in 2010/11, 24,070 females were awarded first degrees in business compared with 26,975 males (HESA, 2012b).

4.4.2.3 Choosing Yorkshire and the West Midlands

When designing this study, I originally considered sampling students from across the country rather than focusing on particular institutions in predetermined regions. However, it became apparent through my expert interviews and initial review of the literature that it would be worth considering both the institutional and regional dimensions of HE in FE when exploring students' decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes.

There are two reasons why these dimensions are particularly important. First, largely because of the aforementioned variety of HE in FE provision, a student's experience as an HE in FE student can vary drastically from one institution to another. Even when offering comparable curriculum to a similar number of students, differences such as the size of HE provision in the college, the number of lecturers teaching an HE in FE course and an institution's

partnership arrangements can significantly affect a student's experience (a point which will be evidenced in Chapter 7).

Second, I thought the regional aspect of this topic should be taken into account because of the extent to which HE in FE provision and local labour markets vary from one region to another. Since the availability of this type of provision likely affects students' awareness of it and/or consideration of it as an option for HE, not accounting for this difference could lead to skewed conclusions. For example, although the South East and North West have approximately the same number of full-person equivalents (FPEs),⁸⁶ the North West has noticeably more HE in FE students than the South East (HEFCE, 2012c). Likewise, the state of students' local labour markets, particularly for HE in FE students attending local institutions, can influence both students' expectations and outcomes. This influence is best exhibited through a quote from one of the student interviewees for this research, who said:

I mean like in the area we live in, I either think it's like the bottom jobs or it's the kind of place that when you've got like an executive job you come back. There's nothing in the middle to do; you have to move. I mean most of the jobs I've been looking at are in London.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

Clearly, for other students at the same institution who do not have the option to move if and when necessary, the local labour market described by Phoebe would be important to consider.

⁸⁶ According to HEFCE (2012c, see paragraph 21), '[i]n order to accurately count provision where students are taught at more than one institution or are studying more than one subject, we have split student headcounts across the institutions/subjects involved in proportion to the activity in each – this results in full personal equivalents (FPEs). Using FPEs gives a more accurate measure of HE provision than using headcounts, where the student would have been arbitrarily assigned to one of the teaching institutions and/or one of the subjects'.

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With this reasoning in mind, I narrowed down the national population of HE in FE providers and students by looking into the shape and scope of HE in FE on a regional basis. When it came to selecting the regions for my study, the aforementioned regional profiles produced by HEFCE helped me understand the landscape of HE in FE in each area of England. In addition to providing an overall summary of HE provision in England, these documents also included the following information for each of the nine regions in England:

- a map showing all the universities and colleges providing HE courses
- a profile of students' study methods and counts of students by institution
- characteristics of students: their age, gender and ethnicity; where they come from; what subjects they study; and how they study – full-time or part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate
- the annual income and funding of each higher education institution (HEI)
- where students find employment when they graduate from an HEI, and what kind of jobs they take
- knowledge exchange activities between HEIs and business (HEFCE, 2012c).⁸⁷

After reviewing these documents, I was initially drawn to the three regions that account for the highest percentages of HE in FE provision (in terms of student numbers) in England: the North West (17 per cent), the South West (14 per cent), and Yorkshire and Humberside (henceforth referred to as Yorkshire; tied with the South East at 13 per cent) (HEFCE, 2012c).⁸⁸ After comparing the information available about the three, I eventually chose Yorkshire due to the number of HE in FE students it had and the amount of HEFCE funding its institutions received. As a region, Yorkshire had one of the highest proportions

⁸⁷ These points are quoted directly from HEFCE (2012c).

⁸⁸ Yorkshire had 22,200 HE in FE students in 2009/10 compared with 22,000 in the South East, placing Yorkshire above the South East in real numbers, even though they share third place in terms of percentages (Parry et al., 2012: 74).

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of HE in FE students in 2009/10, with 15,410 FPEs who were FEC-registered and FEC-taught in addition to 2,815 franchised students (*ibid.*). Of the ten FEIs that received the most direct funding from HEFCE in 2009/10, four of them were located in Yorkshire, which was more than any other region (*ibid.*). Furthermore, of the students at FEIs in Yorkshire, 32 per cent of them were studying for first degrees (the national average is a fifth), which meant the region was a good fit for exploring bachelor's provision (*ibid.*).

The second region I selected was the West Midlands. Initially, this region was chosen for convenience reasons after I met a university contact who was willing to put me in touch with their institution's partner colleges. However, it also provided a helpful contrast to the HE in FE provision in Yorkshire. Approximately 10.4 per cent of HE students in the West Midlands in 2009/10 were taught at FECs (HEFCE, 2012c). Although this region did not have any institutions in the top ten FECs funded by HEFCE in 2009/10, it is evident from the number of franchised students in the region that indirect funding is more widespread there than in Yorkshire. While the West Midlands had only a third of the number of HE in FE FPEs in Yorkshire (5,010 who were FEC-registered and FEC-taught), it had 6,405 franchised students, which was three times the number in Yorkshire (*ibid.*). The numbers of students supported by both direct and indirect funding were close enough in 2009/10 (13,125 for HEFCE direct and 9,450 for HEFCE indirect) to warrant examining both models. Of all the HE in FE students in the West Midlands, 11 per cent were working towards their first degree. Consequently, there was a much higher rate of sub-degree education in FECs in the West Midlands than in Yorkshire, particularly for

HNCs/HNDs (37 per cent in the West Midlands compared with 13 per cent in Yorkshire).

In comparing two regions, I hoped to explore in more depth whether the relative presence of and investment in HE in FE influenced students' decision-making processes in particular. My hypothesis was that evidence of a larger presence and greater investment in HE in FE at the degree level, as seen in Yorkshire, might lead to students being more aware of HE in FE as an option than would be students in the West Midlands. In addition to exploring this issue, I also suspected that (as mentioned above) local labour markets would influence students' employment expectations and outcomes. Therefore, I thought that comparing Yorkshire and the West Midlands would allow for investigating any similarities or differences that might be present within or between regions. After collecting the data, though, this regional dimension did not appear to have as great of an influence on students' decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes as did their age and previous work experience. Consequently, the region in which students attended HE is not considered in the findings reported.

4.4.3 Developing the research instruments

4.4.3.1 Pre-graduation interview schedule

The interview schedule for pre-graduation student interviews (available in 12.1.3.2) consisted of five sections: introduction; current course; student life; career and future projects; and conclusion/future arrangements. While I felt confident about the comprehensiveness of the schedule before using it during fieldwork, it was evident after a few interviews that, in most cases, the schedule

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was too long and detailed for the time available with each student. Therefore, I created an abbreviated version of the schedule (available in 12.1.3.3) to use when I knew time would be an issue.

In the original pre-graduation interview schedule, the introduction contained questions about the interviewee's demographics and background, such as their age and prior educational attainment. However, my Transfer of Status examiners recommended that I provide interviewees with a background information form (available in 12.1.5.4) to complete in advance in order to capture this information without spending time on it during the interview. Due to the average age (43 years old) of participants at one of the institutions included (Gardiner College), students were given an abbreviated version of this form (available in 12.1.5.5) because many of the original questions did not apply.

The questions in the schedule were developed through a combination of reading the literature to assess potential gaps and incorporating suggestions from expert interviewees. A final draft of the schedule was also reviewed by my supervisors and approved by my Transfer of Status examiners in advance of undertaking fieldwork.

Although I originally intended to conduct pilot interviews, I decided not to due to the fact that it took more time than anticipated to recruit institutions and eligible students. By the time I had my first few interviews arranged, obtaining more did not look promising. Consequently, in lieu of using some of the few interviewees I had as pilot interviewees, I treated them as 'official' interviews and made adjustments to the schedule before recruiting more interviewees.

4.4.3.2 Post-graduation interview schedule

Initially, I developed two versions of the post-graduation interview schedule: one for students who were in employment at the time of the interview (available in 12.1.3.4) and one for students who were unemployed or in further study (available in 12.1.3.5). I later developed a third abbreviated version (available in 12.1.3.6), which contained a series of questions that could be answered by email for those students who were unable or unwilling to be interviewed over the phone.

The questions in this schedule were developed through considering what I wanted to know about these students' post-graduation experiences. I was especially interested in learning more about their reflections on both their bachelor's course and on the process of applying for jobs. When speaking to the HE in FE students in particular, I was curious to find out about how they presented themselves as graduates in the labour market and whether they named their college or their partner university as the institution where they studied. I also wanted to learn more about whether students' career projections had changed since they graduated and if so, how.

The two longer versions of the post-graduation interview schedule contained three sections: one dealing with what students had been doing since graduation; one about their transition to employment/further study or about their strategies for seeking employment/further study; and one reflecting back on their course experience and their career projections. The abbreviated version covered similar topics, but as it only included 12 questions, it was not divided into sections.

4.4.3.3 Questionnaire

In order to develop the questionnaire for this research, I used a combination of questions found in previously piloted questionnaires (University of Warwick, 2014b and 2014c and Parry et al., 2012).⁸⁹ The first source (University of Warwick, 2014b and 2014c) consisted of a set of questionnaires used in the Futuretrack study. All of the questionnaires used during this project are accessible from its website, and I used a selection of questions from across the five questionnaires available. The Futuretrack questionnaires were particularly useful in helping me determine the overall structure of the one for this study and to understand how to ask questions about students' job-seeking strategies in particular.

While the questions from Futuretrack helped cover many topics of interest within my questionnaire, the second source (Parry et al., 2012), helped me focus much more specifically on issues related to HE in FE students. The aim of Parry et al.'s (2012: 103) survey, which included 2,523 college students from 27 colleges, was

to provide insights into students' higher education decision making and choices, particularly why they decided to study at a college rather than a university or higher education institution, and their experiences of, attitudes towards, studying at a college.

Combining these questions about HE in FE choices and experiences with the decision-making and career-focused questions from Futuretrack helped me achieve the balance sought for the questionnaire.

Collating all questions of interest from these two surveys led to a first draft with 83 questions and a final questionnaire of 48 questions (available in

⁸⁹ I contacted the individuals who designed the questionnaires to ask for permission to use their questions.

12.1.4),⁹⁰ which students were able to complete within twenty minutes. The final questionnaire had three main sections: background information; current course information; and future plans.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter described the thinking behind the research design and rationale for this study. In particular, it provided an overview of the design, an introduction to the conceptual framework and an explanation for why particular research instruments were used. It also described how the trustworthiness and quality of the research were ensured through the consideration of reliability, validity, generalisability, ethics and positionality. The chapter also outlined how the research design was refined through expert interviews and the detailed work that went into selecting the qualification, subject and regions for the focus of the study. Finally, the process of developing the interview schedules and questionnaire for the study was explained.

While a qualitative approach certainly made the most sense within the confines and interests of this study, it is essential to acknowledge that many of the gaps in the quantitative data available have not been resolved as of 2016. Therefore, there remain substantial limitations in what we understand about the numbers of institutions and students involved in HE in FE provision. Furthermore, that which is available (such as HEFCE's regional profiles and the HE in FE DLHE) is not necessarily updated regularly, meaning there is also not a full understanding of change over time. These issues are essential to resolve in order for comprehensive quantitative research to be conducted in the future.

⁹⁰ The final 48 questions were selected based on their relevance to the study's research questions.

5 METHODOLOGY II: FIELDWORK AND ANALYSIS

Beginning where the last chapter concluded, this chapter will describe recruiting institutions and student participants for the study before recounting the process of carrying out the student interviews and questionnaire. Details about both the institutions and students recruited are provided to contextualise the data to be presented in the subsequent findings chapters. The chapter closes by explaining the coding used to analyse interview data.

5.1 Fieldwork

In total, the fieldwork for this study took just over two years, beginning in March 2012 with the first expert interview and ending in June 2014 with the final post-graduation student interview (see Table 5.1 for a more detailed timeline). In the sections following, each stage of the fieldwork process will be explained in more detail, including the development of the research instruments and the recruitment and selection processes for participants.

Table 5.1 Timeline of fieldwork process

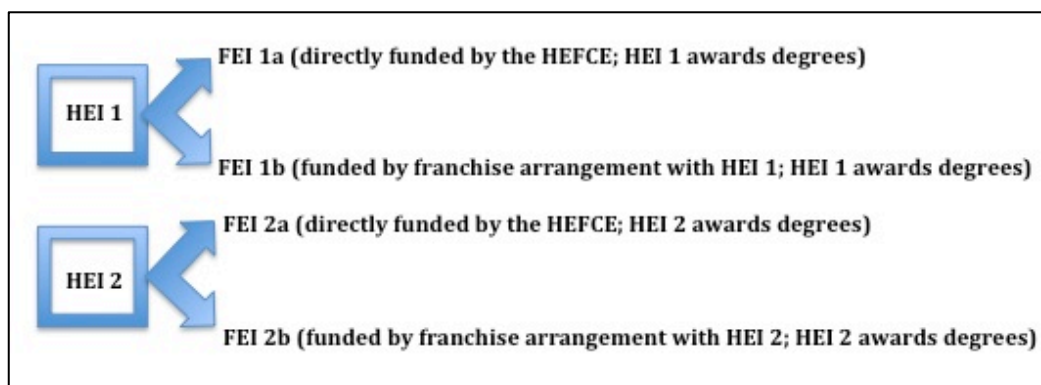
Stage of fieldwork	Time period
Expert interviews	March – April 2012
Initial phone calls with institutions	April – June 2012
Initial visits to some institutions	October 2012
Questionnaire distribution	December 2012 – June 2013
Pre-graduation interviews (students)	January – May 2013
Course leader interviews	June 2013
Post-graduation interviews (graduates)	January – June 2014

5.1.1 Finding eligible institutions

I began recruiting institutions in May 2012, shortly after completing the aforementioned expert interviews. To start, I used the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website to search for all of the universities and

colleges in Yorkshire offering a bachelor's degree in a business-related subject (UCAS, 2012). This search provided a list of potential institutions, which I then attempted to match up based on partnership arrangements. In other words, I aimed to recruit one university in each region in addition to one of their directly funded partners and one of their franchise partners (see Figure 5.1 for an overview of this recruitment structure).

Figure 5.1 Structure for institutional recruitment



I knew from my expert interviews (which were described in 4.4.1), in which 'Relationships/partnerships between HEIs and FEIs' emerged as a key theme, that the interaction between colleges and universities in providing HE would likely be a significant issue within this research. Initially, I hoped that recruiting institutions in different types of partnerships would help me obtain a better understanding of the influence partnership arrangements could have on the student experience (an issue which is discussed further in 7.4). Since indirectly funded students were essentially, at least in my understanding at the time, students of the university being taught at the college, I thought it was possible they could have a closer relationship with the university than students at a directly funded FEC, who were more like college students working towards

university degrees. Therefore, I aimed to obtain six institutions from the region that would fit with the categories in Figure 5.1.

In practice, it was extremely difficult to first determine which colleges and universities were in partnership with each other and then to gain access to all of the necessary institutions. Although I could use the UCAS website to find out where undergraduate business courses were offered, it did not always list the validating university for a particular college. When I encountered this problem, I normally resolved it by checking the relevant college's website, but sometimes even that did not provide the name of the partner university. In some cases, even when the website did provide the name of a partner university, I would later find out that the college was in the process of arranging a new partnership with a different university.⁹¹ Though I did not realise it at the time, the timing of my research was such that in some cases, what had been relatively established partnerships were becoming increasingly unstable in the changing HE environment.⁹² In fact, two of the FEIs included in my research were in the process of switching partners for their business programmes during the exact year that I was conducting fieldwork. This circumstance meant that much of the data I collected, particularly that related to students' relationships with their partner universities, was historical before I had even analysed it. Furthermore, through informal conversation with the course leaders at those institutions, I learned much more about how the partnership arrangements 'were' or 'will be' than how they 'are'. Rather than

⁹¹ The information available about HE in FE providers and partnerships has since improved (see 10.2 for further details).

⁹² This point does not preclude the fact that FE was also going through a time of change, which of course had lasting implications for colleges and their partners. The HE environment is singled out here because, in this instance, it was governmental and institutional decisions about HE provision that were causing instability in these particular partnerships.

being problematic for this research, this shift is emblematic of the changeability of HE in FE. The precarious nature of partnership working is an on-going issue for HE in FE students, HE in FE course leaders and their institutions because little about these arrangements remains certain from year to year.⁹³

In the end, a combination of visiting the UCAS website, college websites, university websites and speaking to knowledgeable informants helped me piece together a list of partnerships for undergraduate business courses in Yorkshire. The same strategy was later used for the West Midlands when it was added to the research. As a testament to how unstable these relationships were at the time I created these lists, it is notable that both were already out of date by the beginning of the 2013/14 academic year.

After formulating this list of institutions for Yorkshire, I began researching which colleges were directly funded by HEFCE. In order to determine the funding arrangements, I downloaded the 2010/11 list of HEFCE-funded institutions (HEFCE, 2010c), which was the most up-to-date available at the time, from the HEFCE website and crosschecked my list of eligible colleges with this list. If a college appeared on HEFCE's list, I knew they were directly funded for their HE provision; if it did not appear on the list, then it was clear they were indirectly funded. However, because directly funded colleges can also receive indirect funding,⁹⁴ the colleges on HEFCE's list were not

⁹³ In fairness, it is important to acknowledge this is not simply an issue for colleges. Universities with partners also face pressures and uncertainties about the future of HE provision. However, the colleges do not appear to have as much control as universities over whether they are or are not in HE partnerships. Furthermore, the fact that the HE in FE student participants knew about, understood and discussed these partnerships (whereas the university students never mentioned them) suggests that the relative stability of these relationships is more likely to noticeably affect HE in FE students than university students.

⁹⁴ Parry et al. (2012: 75-79) provide a helpful table detailing the complex combinations of funding and partnerships that exist. One of the most notable statistics is that there are 16 post-1992 universities which each have ten or more partners.

necessarily receiving funding for their *business* courses from HEFCE. Despite this fact, I thought there would have to be some interaction between the partners about the business courses regardless of the funding arrangements because of the universities' obligation to ensure the quality of college courses and validate their qualifications. Therefore, I was not concerned going into recruitment about knowing whether the business courses were directly or indirectly funded as long as there was some kind of partnership in existence.

Once I compiled a list of eligible institutions and their partners, I began contacting institutions in Yorkshire to arrange initial phone calls to explain my research. Eventually, I arranged phone calls with four Yorkshire-based institutions (one university and 3 FEIs). An additional university I contacted declined to speak to me over the phone and, in response to my initial email, simply refused to participate without discussing the research further.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, this university was essential to making the structure outlined in Figure 5.1 work. However, by the time I had received their response, I had already secured agreement (at least to an initial phone call) from two of its partner colleges. Therefore, once the university refused to take part, I realised that I would either have to start from scratch or go with the institutions I had. It was at this point that I decided to add a second region and aim for three institutions (one university and two FECs) in each, still with the goal of representing a variety of funding arrangements but with less of a focus on the links between the included institutions.

⁹⁵ The university did not give a reason for denying access other than 'on this occasion we are not able to assist with your research'.

5.1.1.1 Recruiting institutions in Yorkshire

The phone calls arranged with institutions in Yorkshire took place during the spring and summer of 2012. During these calls, I provided an overview of my research, including what would be asked of the institution and students involved, and gave the institutional contacts the opportunity to ask questions. I also explained that upon conclusion of the research, a summary of the findings for that institution's students in particular could be made available. On the basis of these conversations, all four institutions agreed to participate and I arranged to visit them in person in October 2012. During my visits, I provided the institutions with more detailed information about the study, including providing them with copies of the participant information sheet and consent form that would be given to students. Additionally, the institution contacts were given the opportunity to see the research questionnaire. They were also offered the chance to review an abbreviated version of my CUREC application and my student interview schedule if requested. Although all of these institutions initially agreed to participate, only three (the university and two of the FECs) followed through with the entire study.

5.1.1.2 Recruiting institutions in the West Midlands

I began recruitment in the West Midlands similar to how I started in Yorkshire, using a combination of the UCAS website and the list of HEFCE-funded institutions to build a list of potential eligible institutions. I started by contacting two universities with the aim of getting at least one of them and their partner colleges on board. In the end, one of the universities agreed to participate and the other agreed to put me in touch with four of its partner

colleges, but neither agreed to both.⁹⁶ Further complicating matters, the university that agreed to participate had multiple business departments that operate as separate entities. As a consequence, instead of having one contact to help me arrange the interviews and questionnaire distribution, I had one for every department.

Through the four partner colleges with whom the second university put me in touch, I secured one participating institution using a similar method to that followed in Yorkshire. However, because this phase of recruitment was taking place later in the academic year, the institution allowed me to conduct the interviews on the same day as my initial visit.

In order to secure one more college in the West Midlands and meet my goal of having at least three institutions in this region, I recruited one that was on my list of eligible institutions. Therefore, I ended up with six institutions in total: one university and two colleges in Yorkshire and one university and two colleges in the West Midlands. None of the final institutions for the study were in partnership arrangements with each other for the purposes of their business courses.

Table 5.2 provides further information about the institutions recruited in both regions. Following this, a series of institutional vignettes provide further information about the particular characteristics and environment of each institution.

⁹⁶ The university that put me in touch with its partner colleges turned out to be extremely valuable in helping me better understand how university-college partnerships initially develop, function on a day-to-day basis and change over time. I visited this university in person during my fieldwork and met with a number of their staff responsible for maintaining partnerships both within England and internationally.

Table 5.2 Data about institutions included

Region	Yorkshire	Yorkshire	Yorkshire	West Midlands	West Midlands	West Midlands
Name	Collins College	Bennett College	Bingley University	Gardiner College	Forster College	Darcy University
Number of students⁹⁷	Large	Small	Medium	Unknown	Medium	Large
Percentage of HE students	6%	10%	Not applicable	Unknown	5.4%	Not applicable
Number of students in eligible cohort	12	22	Over 800	12	46	Over 600
Number of eligible interview participants	8	6	4	7	4	1
Number of questionnaire participants (including incomplete responses)	8	22	14	4	10	20
HEFCE teaching funding (2012/13)	Less than £5 million	Less than £5 million	Less than £50 million	Not applicable	Less than £5 million	Over £50 million
Average age (interviewees)	22.9	29.3	22.0	43.2	25.1	21.0
Average age (questionnaire participants)	21.9	28.6	21.6	46.3	24.7	20.6
Average timetabled contact hours per week	9.5	13.8	5.8	7.8	13.5	12
Average self-study hours per week	5-12	18	15.5	20.9	13	35
Lecturers on business bachelor's courses	Up to 3	Up to 3	Up to 100	Up to 3	Up to 3	Over 100

⁹⁷ Institutions are divided into small, medium and large bands for their number of students: small means fewer than 10,000 students; medium means 10,001-20,000 students; and large means 20,001-30,000 students.

5.1.2 Institutional vignettes

Due to the relevance of each institution's environment for the findings in this research, the following vignettes⁹⁸ provide general information about the institutions, courses and students included in the research. The vignettes are divided by region rather than type of institution and therefore introduce the three Yorkshire institutions (Collins College, Bennett College and Bingley University) followed by the three West Midlands institutions (Gardiner College, Forster College and Darcy University).

5.1.2.1 Yorkshire institutions

Collins College

Collins College is a large (as defined above in footnote 97) FE college, and approximately six per cent of its students are in HE. Despite what seems like a small percentage of HE students, over 60 different HE qualifications are offered there in a wide variety of subjects, including Business, Creative Arts and Design, Education, Engineering and Technology, and Social Studies, among others. Over half of the HE qualifications offered are at degree level and above, including some master's courses. The extent of Collins's involvement in HE is also evident through the amount of public teaching funding the college receives for its HE provision.⁹⁹ Although Collins College has multiple partnerships, it only has one primary partner for validating its degrees (both foundation and bachelor's degrees), which changed shortly after my fieldwork.

⁹⁸ In order to ensure the anonymity of the institutions included, I do not use references for the institutional vignettes. The majority of the information provided comes from a combination of students' background information forms, course handbooks, institutional websites, annual reports, and data available in HEFCE publications (such as HEFCE, 2012b). All institutional names are pseudonyms. The vignettes were written in 2013 and reflect the institutions as they were at the time, therefore, some details used may no longer be accurate.

⁹⁹ As a reminder, even though an institution might receive direct funding from HEFCE for *some* of its HE, that does not mean that *all* of its HE is directly funded.

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Students at Collins College who pursue the top-up year in Business and Management¹⁰⁰ typically progress from other qualifications within the college. However, their prior qualifications are not always strictly business-related. For example, one student interviewee who was completing the top-up degree course previously completed an Advanced Diploma in Information Technology at the college, rather than a foundation degree or HNC/HND in business like many of the other students. The majority of the students interviewed at Collins were of traditional university age and had either applied to university and not been accepted or had chosen to go to college in lieu of starting a job or apprenticeship. There were some mature¹⁰¹ students at Collins, but they were not as prevalent as at other institutions. The minimal presence of mature students is evidenced through the average age of interviewees (22.9) and questionnaire participants (21.9).

At the time of pre-graduation interviews for this study, 12 students were in the top-up year business cohort. Eight of these 12 students were interviewed for this study, making Collins College the institution with the most involvement in this research in terms of number of interviewees. Eight of the students also completed the questionnaire. Although both part-time and full-time versions of the final-year course are offered, all students included in this study were attending full-time. Students attending full-time were required to be on campus for timetabled lectures/seminars approximately one and a half days (9.5 hours) per week during their final year. Although most students reported that the amount of time they spent studying outside of timetabled lectures/seminars

¹⁰⁰ I am using the course title/subject as described by each institution, which is why they differ slightly from one institution to another.

¹⁰¹ I use the UCAS definition of 'mature student', which is 'any student aged 21 or over at the start of their studies' (UCAS, 2014).

varied throughout the semester, those who noted a specific number stated between five to 12 hours per week.¹⁰²

One lecturer was primarily responsible for the whole course; however, there were at least two lecturers who taught various modules of the course. The course included four modules in each of two semesters, for a total of eight modules. Two of these modules (one per semester) were focused on Personal and Professional Development topics and two of them were dedicated to students' final year dissertation. The other four were related to management specific topics such as project planning, evaluation, and decision-making. Assessment consisted of a series of assignments (one per module) rather than exams.

Bennett College

Bennett College is a smaller college, and approximately ten per cent of its students are in HE. The College offers nearly 20 HE qualifications, covering similar subjects to those as Collins, about half of which are at degree level. In 2012/13, Bennett received less than £5 million in teaching funding from HEFCE. Bennett College has multiple university partners who validate their range of HE qualifications, and the partner who validates their business top-up is no longer the same as it was during my fieldwork.

Similar to Collins College, students at Bennett College who pursue the top-up year for Business Management typically progress from other qualifications within the college. However, as with Collins, their prior qualifications are not always strictly business-related. Exceptionally, one

¹⁰² Both contact and self-study hours at each institution were self-reported by students and averaged.

student in the sample from this college had completed a year at a local university before deciding to move to the college to complete his degree. As far as I am aware, this student was the only one out of all of my interviewees who had recent university¹⁰³ experience with which to directly compare his college experience. Half of the student interviewees from Bennett were mature students and, in general, there was a higher proportion of mature students there than at Collins. This difference is evidenced through the average age of interviewees at Bennett (29.3) and the average age of questionnaire participants (28.6), both of which are nearly seven years more than the averages at Collins.

At the time of pre-graduation interviews for this study, approximately 22 students were in the top-up year business cohort. However, unlike at Collins, this business cohort consisted of students from two discrete foundation degree pathways that had been brought together for their final year. Therefore, there was slightly less cohesion in this cohort than was present at Collins. Six students were interviewed for the study and all of them participated in the questionnaire (if they were present the day it was distributed). Both part-time and full-time options are available for this course, and the interviewees for the study included five full-time students and one part-time student. Students attending full-time were required to be on campus for timetabled lecturers/seminars two days per week. However, amongst the full-time students, there was not agreement as to how many hours they spent in timetabled lectures/seminars across those two days; the students' answers

¹⁰³ Some mature students from Gardiner College in particular had previously attended short-cycle courses at universities, but to my knowledge none had progressed directly onto their college top-up year from a university course.

ranged from ten to 16 hours per week. The average reported was 13.8 per week, which would amount to about seven hours per day. The part-time student indicated he attended eight hours per week. For hours spent in self-study (including full-time and part-time students), the average was just under 18 hours per week.

As at Collins College, one lecturer was primarily responsible for the course as a whole, however, there were at least two lecturers who taught various modules of the course. The course included ten modules, including two dissertation modules and two work-based project modules, divided between two semesters. The other six modules were related to management and leadership topics such as human resources and strategy. Assessment consisted of both assignments and examinations, though it was not immediately clear from the course handbook or students how many of each were required.

Bingley University

Bingley University is a medium-sized pre-1992¹⁰⁴ university. Unlike at the colleges, its business provision takes place in a business school located in its own building on the main university campus. The business school accounts for around 17.5 per cent of students at the entire university. In addition to a range of master's and doctoral courses, it offers more than ten different business subject areas for its bachelor's degrees. If they so choose, students are allowed to combine two of the business-related subjects offered in order to complete a Joint Honours degree. Students are also offered the opportunity to complete a four-year degree in order to pursue a year in industry or year

¹⁰⁴ I have chosen to not be specific as to when this university or the other one included in the study was established (other than to say that both were universities prior to 1992) in order to ensure the institutions' anonymity.

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abroad. In 2012/13, Bingley received less than £50 million from HEFCE. The University has a collection of partnerships, including some with FE colleges for whom it validates HE qualifications, though this does not include business bachelor's degrees at Collins College or Bennett College.

Students who are in their final year of a business bachelor's degree have almost without exception entered with A-level qualifications and have been on their course for three or four (if they have done a year work placement or year abroad) consecutive years. There were no mature students in the sample for this study, and it is evident from the average age of interviewees (22 years old) and questionnaire participants (21.6 years old) that mature students are not very prevalent in the population. In stark contrast to the intimate cohort sizes at the colleges, the cohort sizes at Bingley University are in the hundreds. In the first year in particular, it is not uncommon for students to attend lectures with up to 500 students. In 2012/13, there were approximately 800 students in their final year of a business course. Four students from Bingley participated as interviewees for this study and 14 took the questionnaire. In terms of contact hours, students reported an average of 5.8 hours per week of timetabled lectures/seminars, which tended to be spread across the week rather than concentrated on particular days. Alongside this, they reported they complete an average of 15.5 hours of individual study per week.

There are over 100 academic staff at Bingley's business school, which does not include administrative staff. In addition to these staff members, the business school also has a specialist careers service team (which is separate from the University's Careers Service) that caters specifically to the business students. In terms of support services, the presence of this discipline-specific

careers support is one of the more notable differences between this university and the two colleges above.

Since so many different versions of the business bachelor's degree are possible at Bingley, the modules a student takes from year to year can vary significantly. Even in the first year of the bachelor's course, when all business students must take the same five core modules, they are also allowed to choose one elective out of a wide range of options within and external to the business school. The final year consists of two core modules (the topics of which vary depending upon whether the student is completing an honours degree), a dissertation and one elective. Assessment varies from one module to another and seems to be largely down to the discretion of individual lecturers. However, most students end up with a combination of assignments and examinations.

5.1.2.2 West Midlands institutions

Gardiner College

Gardiner is a training provider linked to a Chamber of Commerce in the West Midlands. Strictly speaking, it is not a further education college but rather a further education institution. Alongside its range of FE and HE provision, Gardiner also offers bespoke training for local businesses. Employees of businesses who are members of the Chamber receive discounted rates on the courses they take at Gardiner, and it is therefore a popular training provider within the local business community. Given that the number of Gardiner's courses can vary, overall student numbers are not available. However, it is certain their HE provision accounts for a small percentage of their overall training as only five HE qualifications were offered across the entire institution as of 2012. In fact, 2012/13 was the first year in which a bachelor's top-up year

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was offered at the institution, hence the student interviewees at Gardiner were from the institution's first ever degree-level cohort. Gardiner does not receive any HEFCE funding for its HE provision; therefore all of its HE is indirectly funded. One HE partner validates Gardiner's HE qualifications.

Within the context of this study, Gardiner was the only institution at which every single student was a mature student. The students at Gardiner were also unique in that some of them had previous university experience (though not that took place immediately prior to their top-up year) and many of them either had extensive management-level employment experience or even owned their own businesses. While most mature students at other institutions in the study were studying full-time alongside working part-time, these students were studying full-time alongside working full-time as well. Every student in the sample included had progressed together from prior qualifications taken at Gardiner. In fact, many of them decided to do the top-up year in order to stay in contact with their cohort, rather than because they wanted the qualification. Overall, Gardiner students were the oldest in the study, with the average age of interviewees at 43.2 and of questionnaire participants at 46.3. Many of them did not come from an academic background, and they were the least likely to have A-level qualifications out of the students in the study. Out of 12 students in the final-year cohort, seven students were interviewed and four completed the questionnaire. Lectures/seminars all took place on one day each week, though an independent study group occasionally met on another day. Therefore, 'full-time' for these students meant one full day per week. On average, students reported 7.8 hours per week of contact and 20.9 hours per week of self-study.

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One course leader was in charge of the course and taught a significant portion of it; at least three other lecturers who taught various modules. The course was divided into trimesters, each of which had four modules. Two modules, Enterprising Management and Project, lasted the whole year. The other two were different in each trimester and focused on leadership and management issues. Assessment included both assignments and examinations.

Forster College

Forster College is a medium-sized college, and approximately 5.4 per cent of its students are in HE. It offers more than 1,000 courses in total, of which approximately 70 are HE courses. It has multiple campuses in the West Midlands in addition to one overseas campus. In 2012/13, Forster received less than £5 million in teaching funding from HEFCE. The College has five university partners, one of whom validates all of its business-related HE qualifications.

Like other colleges in the study, students at Forster College tend to progress to the bachelor's top-up year from other sub-degree qualifications within the college, though in some cases students transfer to Forster after completing a sub-degree qualification at another local college. In the sample for this study, a high proportion of students completed sub-degree qualifications in subjects unrelated to business, such as beauty therapy or law. The majority of students in the sample were of traditional university age, with just a few mature students in the cohort. The average age of participants was 25.1 years old for the questionnaire and 24.7 years old for the interviewees. During 2012/13, Forster College had 46 top-up year students in business, divided across five groups, some of which were full-time and some of which were part-time. The group who took my questionnaire and from which my interviewees

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came included ten full-time students. All ten students took the questionnaire and four participated as interviewees. Students were required to be on campus for timetabled lectures/seminars two days per week. They reported an average of 13.5 contact hours per week and approximately 13 hours of self-study.

There was one primary course leader, and three lecturers (including the primary leader) shared the teaching of the course, with each one being responsible for their specialist topic areas. The top-up year course included eight modules divided between two semesters. Modules about students' dissertations and research methods lasted all year, and the other six modules each lasted a semester. The other six modules included topics like Leadership and Entrepreneurship. Assessment was by assignments only.

Darcy University

Darcy University is a large pre-1992 institution. Alongside master's and doctoral programmes, it offers business bachelor's courses across four different departmental areas, each of which includes a range of specialisations. Students have the opportunity to complete Single or Joint Honours programmes, and on some courses they have the opportunity to complete a year in industry in the third year of a four-year course. In 2012/13, Darcy received more than £50 million in teaching funding from HEFCE. Darcy has a range of partners, both national and international, but does not appear to validate HE qualifications at any colleges.

Students applying for general business programmes at Darcy tend to come from a traditional academic background and progress onto the bachelor's in business/economics from the A-level route. Cohort sizes are in the hundreds, and over 600 students were in their final year of a business course during

2012/13. Twenty students took the questionnaire and one participated in the interview.¹⁰⁵ There is a low presence of mature students at Darcy, as evidenced by the average age of questionnaire participants (20.6) and the interviewee (21). In fact, only one mature student was involved in the research (a 25 year-old who took the questionnaire). Students reported 12 contact hours and 35 hours of self-study per week.

The number of lecturers is in the hundreds, therefore, students do not tend to have the same ones from one year to another. Students must complete a total of 120 credits per year, with some modules (worth ten credits each) lasting one semester and others (worth 20 credits each) lasting two semesters. Students have to take 100 credits per year within their main discipline but are allowed 20 credits per year to take outside of their main discipline. Students are primarily assessed by examination but also have some assignments throughout the year.

5.1.3 Recruiting student participants

5.1.3.1 Participant selection criteria

Similar to my original aims with recruiting institutions, I initially set out to recruit student interviewees who met predetermined criteria, with the final goal of recruiting four to six students from each institution (for a maximum of 36 students). Since the primary aim of the study was to gather data that allowed for comparison between university and college students, this consideration influenced the following recruitment criteria:

¹⁰⁵ The low participant numbers at this institution are discussed further in 5.1.3.

- **Qualification and subject:** All participants would be pursuing a bachelor's degree in a business-related subject.
- **Attendance status:** Where possible, all participants would be in full-time education.
- **Age:** All participants should be between the ages of 18-22.¹⁰⁶
- **Work experience:** Participants should not have any former graduate-level work experience (thus students pursuing a second bachelor's degree would be excluded if they held graduate-level jobs before starting their current course).
- **Gender:** Where possible, a maximum of three males and three females would be recruited from each institution in order to aim for equal representation.
- **Nationality:** Where possible, all participants would be British. If international students were included, I would aim for the proportion in the sample to be representative of the proportion in the cohort as a whole.

As I recruited institutions on the basis of their offering a bachelor's in business-related subjects, this criterion was the easiest to guarantee. The constraints of attendance status, age and work experience were based on my understanding through initial reading and expert interviews that the majority of my university participants would be attending full-time, be aged 18-22 years old and lack former graduate-level work experience. Gender and nationality were slightly trickier to gauge, primarily because the balance of gender and international students varied by institution. However, I decided that because any discrepancy in these areas was likely to skew data about employment outcomes, it was best to aim for an even gender balance and as few international students as possible.

¹⁰⁶ My Transfer of Status examiners noted this criterion as particularly important for comparability reasons.

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In practice, the first criterion (qualification and subject) was the only one I could completely control, primarily because I did not include any institutions whose students did not meet this requirement. This criterion was also fairly easy to meet because, as mentioned in 4.4.2.2, business accounts for the largest proportion of HE students in England. I did have some control over nationality and attendance status, though it was to a far lesser extent than qualification and subject. In terms of nationality, there were simply not very many international students on the bachelor's courses at colleges. Though two are included in the final sample of interviewees for this research, both of these students had been living in the UK prior to starting their courses and therefore did not move to the UK solely to pursue their bachelor's degree. Although there was a higher likelihood of having international student participants from the universities due to their higher rates of international students in general, all of the university students included in my sample are British.

Attempting to meet the criterion of only including full-time students was also challenging because the notion of what 'full-time' meant differed greatly between universities, where 'full-time' education consisted of multiple seminars and lectures spread across an entire work week, and colleges, where 'full-time' could mean a maximum of two days' attendance per week. Therefore, although technically speaking all but one of my participants were 'full-time' students, what this meant differed depending upon the institution concerned.

In terms of the gender criterion, I managed to achieve an exact balance in the end, with 15 males to 15 females.¹⁰⁷ Although I did not have a great deal

¹⁰⁷ I did conduct a pre-graduation interview with an additional female, however, as she later proved to be ineligible for the study, I have not included her in the final count of participants.

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of control over achieving this balance during the actual recruitment process, I did tell institutions in advance that I would like to work towards having an equal number of male to female interviewees. I think this helped to a certain extent; however, it also helped that, as previously discussed in 4.4.2.2, business as a subject area tends to have a fairly even gender distribution on a national scale.

The criteria of age and work experience were the most difficult to meet in the way I had originally intended, largely due to the diversity of students pursuing bachelor's degrees at colleges. Although I planned to restrict the age of participants to 18-22 years old, across the institutions in my research, the eligible students ranged from 20 to 54 years old. Had I eliminated everyone older than 22, I would have been left with a small and unrepresentative sample. Therefore, I removed the age restriction completely, and the average age of the final group of interviewees was approximately 28 years old.

Similarly, although I originally wanted to control for prior employment experience in order to prevent skewing the employment outcomes data, excluding potential participants on this basis would have again meant sacrificing potential interviewees. In the colleges in particular, where the entire eligible population was in some cases as small as 12, and where many of the students had prior employment experience, this restriction would have made it very difficult to recruit enough interviewees. Furthermore, I soon began to realise that providing HE to mature students is a key part of many colleges' HE in FE remit, therefore it would have been an oversight to not include the voices of these students in this research.

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In the end, although all students were pursuing the final year or top-up year of a bachelor's degree in business when they were recruited, the range of subjects within business varied. Whereas the HE in FE students were all pursuing a generic business course, such as Business and Management; Business Management; or Business, Strategy and Management, the university students were more specialised, with courses including Management, Marketing, Logistics, Economics and Professional Experience in their titles.

In the final sample, 29 out of the 30 student interviewees were attending full-time (keeping in mind that what constituted 'full-time' varied from one institution to another). They ranged in age from 20 to 54, and as mentioned above, the average age was 28 years old. Work experience varied drastically from one student to another, and there were no relevant consistent patterns among the sample to identify here. As previously stated, of the 30 student interviewees, 15 were males and 15 were females. In terms of nationality, all but two were British.

Although I originally intended to recruit participants for the questionnaire using the same criteria as for the interviewees, I decided not to after realising how difficult it would be to stay within these parameters. Therefore, I informed all participating institutions that any students who were in their final year of a bachelor's degree in a business-related subject were eligible to take the questionnaire. Since the questionnaire collected demographic information such as age, I was then able to use this later if and when I wanted to compare data across and between different groups.

5.1.3.2 Selecting student participants

In addition to having difficulty meeting the predetermined selection criteria due to the diversity of students, I also had very little control over choosing the students to be interviewed. At the colleges, the questionnaire was only distributed *after* interviewees were selected, whereas at the universities, the questionnaire was used *to select* interviewees. Although one of the universities and I discussed the possibility of me distributing the questionnaire in person during a lecture (in which up to 500 students would be present), my university contact had difficulty obtaining the lecturer's agreement.

In the end, this university sent out an email invitation from me to their students inviting them to complete the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, I added the option for participants to indicate whether they would be interested in being interviewed about the topics covered therein. I decided to use this approach at the other university as well, both for consistency and because it seemed the most straightforward way to take a coordinated approach, considering the fact that responsibility for the business courses was split across multiple administrators. Unfortunately, this strategy resulted in only two potential interviewees from one university and four from the other. Furthermore (as mentioned in footnote 107), during the process of conducting pre-graduation interviews, it became apparent that one of these university students was not in her final year and was therefore ineligible for the study.

Initial conversations with the colleges to be included revealed that in most cases, course leaders thought in advance about which students would be the 'most reliable' to serve as interviewees (particularly since they would need

to participate in a second interview after graduating). Clearly, focussing on students who are considered reliable neglects those who are perceived as unreliable, which potentially skews the findings by over-representing 'reliable' students. While this difference in representation is not necessarily problematic for the overall purposes of the study, it does introduce a bias. In practice, among the colleges, two pre-selected interviewees before my arrival, one allowed me to interview everyone present and willing to participate when I visited and one allowed me to take volunteers when I visited.

5.1.3.3 Incentives for participation

During the process of recruiting institutions and students, I was frequently asked about incentives for student participants. Although, in designing the research, I had considered different models of monetary incentives for students, I decided not to offer any for the pre-graduation interviews and questionnaire. This decision was partially due to budgetary constraints, however, I also felt that offering incentives might lead to recruiting participants who were motivated by financial gain rather than an interest in being part of the research. It was important to me, due to the topics at hand, that the student participants were primarily motivated by a desire to be involved.

Nevertheless, I did explain to the tutors and students that the students might benefit from being involved because the questions would encourage them to reflect on their experience and think about their plans for the future. As it turned out, the colleges were very receptive to the idea that the students would benefit simply from participating. In one case, the college encouraged

students to add their participation to their CV as research-related experience. At another institution, where the students were in the process of designing their own research, they were very curious about what it was like to be interviewed. Many of them had never taken part in interviews but were planning to use them in their dissertation projects and were therefore interested to see how they would be conducted. One student even asked if she could record the interview in order to learn from my style as an interviewer. On other occasions, students explained to me that one of the reasons they decided to take part was because they had or were planning to use interviews in their research and knew how important it was to have willing participants.

For the post-graduation interviews, I provided a monetary reward (rather than incentive) in the form of a £10 Amazon voucher. Participants were not aware of this reward until completion of the interview. Hence, I ensured their follow-up participation, like their initial participation, was not motivated by financial gain.

5.1.4 Carrying out the student interviews and questionnaire

5.1.4.1 Interviews

As explained above, I conducted two rounds of interviews with student participants. The first round of interviews took place between January and May 2013, which means every student was interviewed within the six months before they were due to graduate. The second round of interviews took place at least six months after students had graduated, between January and June 2014.

Where possible, I aimed to conduct the first round of interviews in person. This strategy was intended to help me build rapport with the students

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and subsequently make it easier to reach agreement with them to do a second interview after graduation. However, because I was not invited to meet students at the universities in the way that I was at the colleges, interviews with college participants took place in person at their institutions and interviews with university participants took place over the phone. Interestingly, though, the phone interviews often lasted longer and went into more depth than those conducted in person. There are myriad reasons for why this could be the case, but it did occur to me later that perhaps speaking over the phone was less intimidating than sitting across the table from a stranger asking questions about your educational experience. However, it is also possible that there is a difference between the two groups of students (university students and HE in FE students) in terms of how much they had to say and/or how comfortable they were discussing the topics covered in the interviews. All of the post-graduation interviews took place over the phone.

During the first round, the time of the interviews ranged from 6 minutes 26 seconds to 70 minutes 25 seconds. The ones conducted over the phone were all done individually, but many of the in-person interviews were conducted in pairs (meaning I would interview a pair of students at a time). The reason for this arrangement was normally down to some kind of time constraint. In some cases, I interviewed students in the middle of their lectures, so interviewing in pairs meant there was less disruption to the rest of the class. On other occasions, I interviewed students between their lectures; therefore there was not enough time to interview all of the students individually without them missing portions of the lectures. While interviewing in pairs sometimes worked well, such as when the students would play off one another in their answers, it

was also extremely problematic when a student with a strong personality was paired with someone who was less talkative. In these cases, I would address the less talkative student directly when asking questions (either before or after the other student had answered) to ensure they were given space to answer.

Oftentimes, my time with students was also cut short due to the fact that students were not given the background information forms (which had been provided to the institutions) to fill out in advance, which meant they spent the first portion of their time with me filling these out. Unfortunately, though these were intended to help me save time by gathering basic demographic information outside of the interview timeframe, they ended up costing time because it took longer for students to complete than it would have for me to simply ask them the background questions outright.

Table 5.3 provides further information about the student participants, including how many came from each institution, their pseudonyms, their ages, their subject areas¹⁰⁸ and the interviews in which they participated. Reviewing Table 5.3, it is evident that the distribution of participants between types of institution is clearly uneven. However, due to the substantial amount of data already available about university students and the lack thereof for HE in FE students, it was more important for this study to obtain as much information as possible about the latter. Nonetheless, it made sense to collect data from a small selection of university students in order to have comparable data from students who were at the same stage in their academic experience and in the same HE system as the HE in FE students.

¹⁰⁸ These are the subject areas as written by students on their background information forms.

Table 5.3 Data about student interviewees

Student pseudonym	Age	Subject	Institution pseudonym	Region	Pre-graduation interview	Post-graduation interview
Max	20	Business Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Olivia	20	Business and Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Lily	20	Business and Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Phoebe	20	Business and Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Poppy	26	Business and Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Lucy	35	Business and Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Alexander	22	Business and Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Ethan	20	Business and Management	Collins College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Omar	30	Business Management	Bennett College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Leo	37	Business Management	Bennett College	Yorkshire	✓	Ineligible
Chloe	24	N/A	Bennett College	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Scarlett	40	Business Management	Bennett College	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Charlie	24	Business Management	Bennett College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Anna	21	Business Management	Bennett College	Yorkshire	✓	–
Rosie	24	Management with Professional Experience	Bingley University	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Edward	22	Management and Marketing (PEP)	Bingley University	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Harry	20	Business and Logistics	Bingley University	Yorkshire	✓	✓
Matthew	22	Economics	Bingley University	Yorkshire	✓	✓

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Student pseudonym	Age	Subject	Institution pseudonym	Region	Pre-graduation interview	Post-graduation interview
Thomas	54	Business Management	Gardiner College	West Midlands	✓	–
Louise	49	Business Studies	Gardiner College	West Midlands	✓	–
Nick	31	Leadership and Management	Gardiner College	West Midlands	✓	–
George	–	Business Management	Gardiner College	West Midlands	✓	–
Abigail	39	Business Studies	Gardiner College	West Midlands	✓	✓
Isaac	43	Business Studies	Gardiner College	West Midlands	✓	–
Jack	43	Business Management	Gardiner College	West Midlands	–	✓
Madison	19	Economics	Darcy University	West Midlands	✓	Ineligible
Archie	21	Economics	Darcy University	West Midlands	✓	✓
Fleur	23	Business Management and Strategy	Forster College	West Midlands	✓	–
Imogen	29	Business	Forster College	West Midlands	✓	–
Caroline	–	Business, Strategy and Management	Forster College	West Midlands	✓	–
Francesca	22	Business, Strategy and Management	Forster College	West Midlands	✓	–

In total, 30 eligible interviewees participated in the study. Eighteen of these students were from institutions in Yorkshire and 12 were from institutions in the West Midlands. Twenty-nine of them participated in the pre-graduation round and 12 participated in the post-graduation round,¹⁰⁹ resulting in 41 student interviews for the study as a whole. Notably, 100 per cent of the eligible university interviewees participated in the post-graduation interviews compared with approximately 28 per cent of the HE in FE students.

When contacted and asked to participate in post-graduation interviews, only one student explicitly declined. All others who did not participate in a post-graduation interview were either not contactable (i.e. did not provide the correct contact information), did not respond to attempts to contact them or, in the case of Leo (37-year old male student from Bennett College who was the one part-time student) were not eligible because they had not yet graduated.

5.1.4.2 Questionnaire

All students in the final year of a bachelor's degree in a business-related subject at the included institutions were eligible to participate in the questionnaire. Although I originally intended to only offer an online version of the questionnaire, thereby offering participants convenience and complete anonymity, in practice this was not the preferred method of distribution at every institution. Therefore the questionnaire was distributed in person at two institutions and online at the other four. The in-person version (available in 12.1.4) was administered by a course leader at one institution and by myself at

¹⁰⁹ Jack, from Gardiner College, was not available to participate in a pre-graduation interview. He subsequently contacted me and agreed to participate in a post-graduation interview, which is why he is the only participant to not have a tick in the pre-graduation interview column.

the other. The online version was available via QuestionPro (www.questionpro.com) between December 2012 and June 2013; the participation of institutions was scattered throughout that time. In total, approximately 1597 students¹¹⁰ were invited to take the questionnaire and 91 responded, resulting in a response rate of 5.7 per cent. Unfortunately, 13 of these responses were not useable. Of the 78 useable responses¹¹¹ received, 34 were from university students and 44 were from college students. The participants included 32 males and 46 females. The majority of respondents identified as White (88 per cent) followed by Asian or Asian British (5 per cent), Mixed (4 per cent) and Black or Black British (3 per cent). The average age of participants was just over 25 years old.

Although at first glance this response rate appears low, it is important to consider the way in which the questionnaire was used at colleges versus universities. Whereas at the colleges the questionnaire was used as an information-gathering instrument, at the universities it was more frequently used as a tool for recruitment. Since it was not as straightforward to recruit participants from the universities, the questionnaire was the primary recruitment method for those students. Additionally, the questionnaire had the specific role of broadening the amount of participants, not to obtain a representative sample.

¹¹⁰ I say 'approximately' because this number comes from adding together the number of eligible students each institution claimed to have. While I believe the numbers that were given to me are probably correct, I cannot guarantee whether each and every student actually received the questionnaire.

¹¹¹ Of the 78 useable responses, 10 were incomplete. Responses from these are used where possible in the analysis.

5.2 Data analysis

5.2.1 Analysing the interview data

Although, in the end, I did not use grounded theory methodology for this study, my initial exploration of it (described in 4.1) led me to adopt two of its principles as part of my approach to data analysis. First, rather than waiting until the end of data collection to begin analysing data, I started the analysis process shortly after beginning my fieldwork. Consequently, ‘the data collection and analysis proceeded in tandem, repeatedly referring back to each other’ (Bryman, 2008: 541). It was therefore helpful throughout this process to refer to the questions posed by Srivistava and Hopwood (2009: 78) in their iterative framework for qualitative analysis:

1. What are the data telling me?
2. What is it I want to know?
3. What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?

Asking these questions throughout my fieldwork and analysis forced me to engage with gaps in the data, some of which I could then address by seeking out additional data sources.¹¹² This iterative process also contributed to my preparation for the post-graduation interviews conducted with students because I usually analysed a student’s first interview just before contacting them for the second.

Second, I implemented certain aspects of the constant comparative method used in grounded theory for coding data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967,

¹¹² For example, the context interviews (which were introduced in 4.1) conducted with two course leaders were arranged in order to help me better understand students’ experiences.

2008). Although Strauss and Corbin (1998) discuss in detail the potential origins of coding categories, Dey (1993: 106) clearly lists four sources that encapsulate these more succinctly. According to Dey (1993: 106), categories derive from ‘inferences from the data; initial or emergent research questions; substantive, policy and theoretical issues; imagination, intuition and previous knowledge’. In grounded theory analysis, categories must be created and then, after being used, be compared to other instances within the data where those same categories are used. According to Glaser and Strauss (2008), this is ‘the basic, defining rule¹¹³ for the constant comparative method’, which is the method used in grounded theory to develop theory from the data. For example, if I used the category ‘college culture’ at a particular point of an interview transcript, then I would need to compare this instance to other places in the data where I used this category in order to look for differences between the two. In the process of doing this, one

starts thinking in terms of the full range of types or continua of the category, its dimensions, the conditions under which it is pronounced or minimized, its major consequences, its relation to other categories, and its other properties’ (Glaser and Strauss, 2008: 106).

According to Dey (1993: 102), this ‘process can continue until the analyst is satisfied that all relevant distinctions between observations have been drawn and observations can be compared effectively in terms of an established category system’. This entire process ‘makes probable the achievement of a complex theory that corresponds closely to the data, since the constant comparisons force the analyst to consider much diversity in the data’ (Glaser and Strauss, 2008: 114). In particular, one of the benefits of this thorough

¹¹³ In their words, the rule is that ‘*while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category*’ (Glaser and Strauss, 2008: 106; emphasis theirs).

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process is that the researcher is required to engage with outliers in the data and account for them in the theory developed.

One example in my data of where this process was particularly helpful comes from the pre-graduation interview conducted with Charlie (24-year-old male HE in FE student). Charlie was a unique participant in this study because, unlike any other student I interviewed, he completed a year at a university prior to attending college. Hence, when he spoke about university-college comparisons, they were based on direct experience rather than perceptions or hearsay. Because of his experience, he engaged with this topic in a different way than other participants, and much of what he said contradicted others' opinions. Capturing such differences during analysis was essential to developing a comprehensive understanding of different students' experiences.

To begin analysing my interview data, I initially chose six pre-graduation interviews (five from colleges and one from a university) to transcribe. I selected these six interviews (Max, Olivia, Omar, Charlie, Anna and Rosie) because they represented a diverse array of backgrounds and experiences amongst the students I had interviewed to date.

During the coding process, I used a combination of descriptive, topic and analytical codes (Richards, 2009: 96-97; the initial, further developed and final coding frameworks for this study are available in 12.2). Descriptive codes included personal characteristics, such as a student's age or current job. For example, when Olivia (20-year old female HE in FE student) was asked if she worked at the moment and said *'Yeah, I just have a part-time job at my shop in the village'*, it was coded 'employment current'. However, the importance of comparing different instances of one code's use became apparent during

another use of ‘employment current’. For example, Max responded to the same question with a much more detailed answer:

I clean at a high school, so at the minute I’m not doing mornings...because I only do the mornings to make up for the days when I’m here which is only a Friday morning at the minute...but I work on an evening in a school and I’ve just started...cleaning for an old lady 16 hours a week. And then I also work in a holiday park in the summer on the coast cleaning accommodation.

Max, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

While some sections of this quote could be coded ‘employment current’, there are also other elements to do with the student’s weekly timetable and even work-life balance. Many quotes like this one had to be teased apart into their different elements, or in other instances, the same section was coded with multiple codes. In a similar vein, there were also sections in the interview data where one code captured many different aspects of the same experience. For instance, in addition to the above examples, ‘employment current’ was also used when students discussed how they obtained their current job, how long they had been doing it and their current salary.

In addition to descriptive codes, topic codes were related to what a student was talking about in a particular section of the interview, such as in the following paragraph, which was originally coded ‘workload’:

The past two years, it’s not been too bad because you just—you know, four assignments and that’s it, but this year it’s quite heavy. Because like we’ve just done three assignments and we’ve got a dissertation to do, which is due in in May, and then we’ve got another three assignments on top.

Max, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

As with the example above, I frequently coded sections such as this one (which discusses both workload and assessment) with multiple codes to capture everything the student said.

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Finally, analytical codes were related to overarching ideas linked to what the students were discussing. The key analytical codes were those based on the conceptual framework (introduced in 4.2): figured world; boundaries; culture; and identity. Others were developed when and where necessary. For example, another important analytical code was 'value of degree to individual', which is exemplified in the following example:

I've enjoyed the experience...I've surprised myself with you know something that I actually seem quite good at I guess. I think as much as anything I've exceeded my expectations.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

Since most of the interviews followed a pattern in terms of the topics they discussed, I could usually anticipate where within an interview transcript certain descriptive and topic codes might be. In contrast, analytical codes varied in how frequently and at which points they emerged. Therefore, the analytical codes were particularly helpful when revisiting interview transcripts because they flagged up where students discussed relevant conceptual issues.

In the first instance, most of the codes used were descriptive or topic; analytical codes were then added later as themes began to emerge through continuous work with the interview data. However, due to my awareness of the constant comparative method, oftentimes what started as one descriptive or topic code would divide into multiple descriptive or topic codes to capture several dimensions of a similar idea or concept. Due to the complex nature of some students' answers, it became necessary to develop sub-codes for what had started as one-dimensional overarching codes. For example, a category which began as 'decision making' the first time I used it divided into 'decisions

qualification', 'decisions institution', 'decisions subject', and so on after comparing one instance of it in one interview to an instance in another.

In addition to dividing codes with multiple dimensions, I also found it necessary to take notes on codes with subtle differences to help me remain as consistent as possible in analysing additional interviews. Although, for instance, the original codes of 'aspirations' and 'post-graduation plans' were often used within the same section of an interview, 'aspirations' referred to long-term goals, such as owning one's own business in the future, whereas 'post-graduation plans' referred to short-term goals, such as finding one's first job after graduation.¹¹⁴

Inevitably, some passages required a combination of descriptive, topic and analytical codes. This passage from one college student initially proved very tricky:

I'd like to be—if I hopefully get like a buying, like a trading/buying job out of uni—I'd like to think in 5 years' time that I'd be working towards like a fully fledged buyer or even on my way to like being in like a management position. I'd preferably like to do it in a company that I'm interested in, like coffee's quite a good one I think.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

While on the surface this student is discussing her aspirations, or long-term goals, she also interestingly uses the phrase 'out of uni', thereby referring to herself as a university student and/or her experience as a university experience. Such references became increasingly important during analysis as perceptions of university from an outsider's perspective versus perceptions of university from an insider's perspective developed as a strong theme.

¹¹⁴ These codes do not appear in the final coding framework. They were changed during the process of analysis to 'goals six months after graduation', 'goals in three to five years' and 'goals in lifetime'.

Coding the initial six interviews resulted in the development of 58 categories, which expanded and contracted multiple times before developing into a coding framework based on the descriptive, topic and analytical codes proposed by Richards (2009). The final framework (available in 12.2.3) included 21 codes and 50 sub-codes.

5.2.2 Analysing the questionnaire data

To analyse the questionnaire data (5.1.4.2 provided details on how the questionnaire was distributed and the response rate), I downloaded the responses to the online version as a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I then entered the responses from the hard copy version into the same spreadsheet, which allowed me to analyse all responses simultaneously. I used Excel to analyse the responses to each individual question (which primarily consisted of generating descriptive statistics) and cross-tabulated responses with variables such as type of institution. This strategy allowed me to see, for instance, how the results for each question compared across type of institution. I then divided the questions into separate spreadsheets based on my research questions. Therefore, one spreadsheet included answers to questions about students' decisions, one about their experiences, one about their expectations and one about their outcomes. I also created a fifth spreadsheet which included relevant demographic information, thereby allowing for analysing data according to different personal characteristics of respondents. This organisation system made it possible to then look at the most relevant questionnaire results when working on answering any particular research question.

5.3 Conclusion

Reflecting on the methodological decisions made in advance of beginning this study, it is clear that a predominantly qualitative approach helped me work towards answering the research questions. Nevertheless, I faced a number of challenges in implementing the chosen methodology. In addition to having difficulty finding and mapping eligible institutions, I also encountered a number of issues when attempting to recruit and interview comparable students.

In her guide to working with qualitative data, Richards (2009: 133) says '[t]he ultimate excitement and terror of a qualitative project is that you can't know at the start where it will end'. At the beginning of this research, I believed that the data gathered would allow comparison between two groups: students at universities and students at colleges. However, during the process of data analysis, it quickly became impossible to contain students' voices within these two groups alone. The longer I worked with the data, the more the groups multiplied. Each institution became its own group. I noticed similarities between younger students across types of institution, and the views of mature students differed from younger students. Students who worked part-time became a relatively unified group, as did students who worked full-time. Even the different aspects of students' HE journeys became entangled: students' expectations were rooted in factors considered during their initial HE decisions and employment outcomes could not be separated from the influence of students' HE experiences. I struggled with how to represent all of these individuals and their journeys wholly and authentically.

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In the midst of this struggle, I returned repeatedly to the aforementioned iterative framework by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009: 77), who claim '[r]eflexive iteration is at the heart of visiting and revisiting [qualitative] data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refine focus and understandings'. In other words, continuing to work with the data was the only way to fully understand and be able to accurately report students' journeys.

Continually revisiting the data while using the iterative framework led to two important insights. First, the data clearly demonstrated one of the key problems with comparing HE across types of institution: 'cross-sector comparisons, whatever their purposes, are precarious and have become harder to make in recent years' (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004: 23). The fact that HE in FE is just as complex, if not even more so, than it was when this statement was made in 2004 means that cross-sector comparisons are still not straightforward. In fact, as will become apparent in the next few chapters, very little about HE in FE is comparable across institutions. Therefore, expecting my findings to fit into neat comparative boxes was unreasonable.

Secondly, I was initially so intent on using type of institution as my primary comparative focus that I was missing the rich similarities and differences that existed across individual institutions and students. Yet understanding the journeys of individual students and the influence of their institutions is essential. In a diverse, mass HE system, all of these similarities and differences are important; not just those that exist at the level of institutional type. Therefore, while my research questions focus on comparing students according to type of institution, in reporting the findings, I have

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sought to be clear about individual circumstances (both for students and their institutions) and to separate the influence of these from the influence of institutional type.

6 FINDINGS I: STUDENTS' DECISIONS ABOUT HE

The findings of this thesis are presented in the next three chapters, each of which focuses on data related to one or two research questions:

Findings I: Students' decisions about HE

Research question:

- What factors influence students' decisions about where to pursue HE (i.e. at an FE college or university)?

Findings II: Students' experiences of HE

Research question:

- How does the HE student experience compare between FE colleges and universities?

Findings III: Students' employment expectations and outcomes

Research questions:

- Are the post-graduation outcomes of HE in FE graduates different from university graduates? If so, in what ways are they different?
- How do the post-graduation outcomes of HE graduates six months after graduation compare with their expectations?

Data from all three chapters is drawn together in Chapter 9.

6.1 Researching students' decisions about HE

Researching the factors influencing students' decisions about HE, especially when including HE in FE students, is challenging for three primary reasons. First, factors such as social class (Ball et al., 2002; Crozier et al., 2007), childhood community (Esmond, 2012), family history of HE (Crozier et al., 2007; Ertl, Carasso and Holmes, 2013) and race (Crozier et al., 2007) can contribute to potential applicants' beliefs about particular institutions, types of institutions and the value of HE in general. These beliefs can then, whether applicants are conscious of it or not, inform their decision-making. While they might be aware of the potential influence these factors can have, they do not necessarily mention them in discussing their decision-making processes. Hence,

it can be difficult to determine how significant these factors are relative to those that students do report.

Second, asking students to recount their reasoning behind decisions made approximately three (and sometimes more) years ago presents its own problems, namely that they either do not remember or potentially misremember their reasoning and therefore misreport it. For example, although students interviewed for this study were technically 'in HE' from when they started their first HE qualification, they were interviewed during their final year and spoke from this perspective. As a result, it is possible that their understanding of their decision-making process changed over time, and they may have reported different reasoning at other stages. This issue is compounded by the difficulty of separating their reasons for deciding to do a particular subject from deciding to do a degree and again from deciding to go to a particular institution or type of institution.

While both of these issues (the influence of a student's background and the possibility of them misreporting their reasoning) could be construed as problematic, it is arguable that '[r]egardless of whether things happened the way people said they did, what interests us [in qualitative research] is that people chose to tell us that they happened that way' (Luker, 2010: 167). Furthermore, because of the increasing importance of student satisfaction in the competition for HE funding, what students *believe* and *claim* influenced their decision can be equally as important as any background or factors they do not mention.

Finally, students who complete their bachelor's degrees at colleges can sometimes have more decision points compared to their counterparts at

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universities. Davies (2012: 262) argues that the decision to participate in undergraduate education includes three parts: deciding to participate in HE; choosing a subject; and choosing a university (or other institution). However, an extra step must be added for many HE in FE students. Whereas university students apply to HE with the intention of completing a bachelor's degree by the end of it, college students are usually not required to make the final decision to do a bachelor's degree until after completing a sub-degree qualification. At least some students at colleges first decide whether to pursue HE, then choose a subject, then decide where to go for HE and then decide to complete their top-up year for a bachelor's degree. While their decision-making is not necessarily this sequential in practice, the point is that HE in FE students must make a conscious decision to continue to a bachelor's degree and can easily opt out at a lower level while still gaining an HE qualification. In contrast, university students who start on bachelor's degree courses do not typically have the option of leaving with a lower level qualification and therefore must complete their degree to graduate.

The data presented here focus on the decisions of HE in FE students. However, throughout this chapter, information from the interviews conducted with university students will be used to compare HE in FE students' journeys with those of university students. The data discussed were primarily collected during pre-graduation interviews with final year students, which took place between January and May 2013, and the questionnaire taken by final year students, which was distributed between December 2012 and June 2013. While factors which influence students' original choice of institution and decision to stay at the same institution are most relevant to the stated research question,

understanding these students' initial motivations for pursuing HE can help to make sense of their later decisions. As such, these motivations are accounted for when reporting the data below. Since all students in this study were undertaking HE at the time of participation, students who considered entering HE but did not do so are necessarily excluded.¹¹⁵

6.2 The influence of age on initial HE decisions

Although there are some differences across type of institution in terms of why students decide to pursue HE, the more significant differences exist across age groups. While going to HE is often presented as an opportunity for younger students, mature students¹¹⁶ considering HE encounter feelings of fragility and worries about risk (Davies and Williams, 2001; Davies, Osborne and Williams, 2002). Likely because of their encounters with fragility and risk, mature students are often seen to demonstrate a more measured approach to entering HE, and especially to pursuing it full-time (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2013), than do younger students.

However, when initially reviewing the questionnaire findings,¹¹⁷ it appears that the majority of students pursuing bachelor's degrees in business have similar reasons for pursuing HE, regardless of the type of institution they attended or their age. In the questionnaire for this study, 26 per cent of all students (including both college and university students) claimed that their

¹¹⁵ The views of this population are covered extensively in other studies, such as Futuretrack (University of Warwick, 2014b and 2014c).

¹¹⁶ Using the UCAS (2014) definition mentioned in footnote 101, all but one of the mature students in this study were HE in FE students. The one exception was a university student who took the questionnaire.

¹¹⁷ As a reminder, the questionnaire for this study was not concerned with finding statistically significant similarities or differences between colleges and universities. Instead, it was intended to contextualise interview data by providing data from a larger population.

most important reason¹¹⁸ for entering HE was 'It will give me better opportunities in life'. This response was closely followed by 'To help me get a good job' (25 per cent). When dividing the questionnaire findings into college versus university students, the former reason (better opportunities) was most important for college students and the latter reason (a good job) was most important for university students. The third most popular answer overall, though notably less popular than the other two, was 'It was part of my long-term career plans' (13 per cent). This answer was also the third most popular in the two separate institutional groups, though it was selected by a smaller proportion of university students (10 per cent) than college students (16 per cent). In fact, in the college student sample, this answer was tied with 'My existing qualifications were inadequate to meet my career ambitions', which no university students selected as their most important reason.

Despite these similarities across type of institution, the fact that at least some college students believed their existing qualifications were inadequate was intriguing because this theme also arose prominently during the interviews, particularly amongst mature students. When isolating the students who chose this questionnaire response, all except one were over the age of 43.

Given the sacrifices many mature students must make to undertake HE alongside external responsibilities, pursuing it is often a riskier decision than it is for younger students and, consequently, requires careful consideration. As

¹¹⁸ As can be seen in the questionnaire (see 12.1.4), students were first asked to indicate all of the factors that contributed to their initial HE decision and then to isolate the most important factor. The same structure was used when asking students about their institutional and course-related decisions. Futuretrack (University of Warwick, 2014b) and Parry et al. (2012) also used this method of questioning.

Davies and Williams (2001: 201) conclude in research about mature students' HE decision-making:

[t]he fact that higher education was an investment that would eventually bring high returns was hardly disputed. However, the returns in terms of a 'better job' in all its complexity were long term while the costs to individuals and their families were immediate.

Essentially, mature students must face the consequences of their decision to enter HE before they reap the benefits, and the eventual benefits are not guaranteed. While younger students face similar labour market circumstances in terms of seeking a return on their investment in HE, the immediate consequences for mature students can be more drastic due to their roles as parents, breadwinners, business owners and employees. These consequences can include less free time, a lower income and more pressure, all of which affect the individual entering HE, their family members and potentially their employers and work colleagues. For these students, HE can be a disruptive force in the structure and balance of their lives.

Since entering HE instantly affects mature students' life circumstances, there is a lot at stake if they do not receive a sufficient return on their investment of time and money in HE. Consequently, they typically make an active, conscious decision to pursue HE and have justifiable reasons for doing so. Therefore, I refer to students in this group as the Deciders (as opposed to the Directed, Drifters and Destined, all of which will be introduced below).¹¹⁹ In almost every mature student case in this study, the student's primary reason for deciding to pursue HE was based on their desire to progress or develop in their career.

¹¹⁹ These categories are not included in the coding framework for this study. They were derived through the process comparing instances of the codes and sub-codes related to 'decisions' across interviews.

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During interviews, many mature students reported pursuing HE because they were not being given equal employment opportunities due to their lack of a degree:

I was getting fed up of starting at the bottom and having to go to the top [in previous jobs], so I did this course so I could maybe go in...near the top anyway rather than working my way from the bottom up the entire time, so that's the main reason I did it, because I wanted the qualification to say I don't want to start at the bottom; I want to start at the top!

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

I've got qualifications and [am] in a management position, but [for the jobs I want], they won't even look at you if you haven't got a degree. If I said I've got 25 years' automotive experience, and the guy next to me has just come out of university with a degree in sociology, he'll get the job before me. They won't look at you unless you've got a degree.

Isaac, 43-year-old male HE in FE student

Both Scarlett and Isaac demonstrate how a student's employment experience can shape their beliefs about the value of a degree in the labour market and influence their HE decisions. In Scarlett's case, she believes that a degree will allow her to skip entry-level positions and start at the management level instead. Although Isaac obtained a management level position without HE qualifications, he then had difficulty switching companies without a degree. As he explained later in the interview, working for the best companies in his industry requires having a degree, whereas relevant experience is desired but not always considered to be essential. These two students' examples exhibit the mature students' belief that a degree will instantly open doors that cannot be opened by work experience alone.

Similarly, mature students who owned or managed businesses reported entering HE after they 'reached a ceiling' in their career:

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I had a company and I'd got to the point where I felt I'd reached a ceiling. I would sit in accountants' meetings and I would not really understand what they were saying. I'd go to business meetings and not feel that I could hold my own in conversations, and so decided that I wanted to educate myself more.

Abigail, 39-year-old female HE in FE student

Abigail's desire to enter HE was based on gaining knowledge rather than just a certificate. In fact, as she explained later in the interview, Abigail did not initially plan to do her top-up year and in the end only did so because she enjoyed meeting with her tutors and course mates each week. Her case reveals that some mature students see the knowledge gained through HE as potentially more valuable than the qualification itself.

Even mature students who did not directly point to particular career goals indicated an awareness of the value of a degree in the current labour market:

I did an Advanced Diploma in IT and then when I finished that, look with the job market the way it was, there was just nothing out there, so I thought you know what can I do to actually use the time instead of just sort of sitting around trying to find a job; I'll make use of my time, so I started my degree...really to get a better job.

Lucy, 35-year-old female HE in FE student

Although Lucy did not define precisely what she considered to be a 'better job', she felt confident that a degree would help her achieve it. From her perspective, working towards the degree was an effective use of her time because of the potential future benefits. Taking these stories into consideration alongside the questionnaire findings, it is evident that because mature students truly believe, whether based on experience or perception, that a degree could benefit them, they have confidence in the process of HE and their reasons for pursuing it.

In contrast to mature students, younger students across both colleges and universities described a more passive HE decision-making process. Rather

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than taking ownership of their decision to pursue HE, younger students in this study can be divided into three groups: the Directed; the Drifters; and the Destined. Students who fall into the Directed category described being influenced and/or pressurised by others to pursue HE. For example, some students explained the influence their school or family had on their decision:

They don't push anything else on you at school, like I found that I mean I would be in top sets since I started at year 7 in school, so I spent like 6-7 years in that class and we had someone come in and talk about apprenticeships to us at one point, but for the people in my course, it was always like uni, uni, uni sort of thing...that was something that's pushed on you at a certain level.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

I didn't like doing my A-levels. I hated the setting of A-levels and...I think I was going through a bit of a rebellious stage at the time and I ended up falling into [a] beauty [course]...I didn't really know what to do after the foundation degree, so I thought the top-up degree would be the best way forward.

Francesca, 22-year-old female HE in FE student

I wanted to be a baker—my family pushed me to get a degree...go to university and everything, so [I came] because of them I guess.

Fleur, 23-year-old female HE in FE student

Despite enjoying her HE experience, Phoebe spoke frequently during her interview about the frustration she felt when her school did not offer extensive guidance on post-school options for work or education. She did not exhibit a sense of ownership over her decision to enter HE, although elsewhere in her interview she clearly demonstrated a sense of pride in having done so. In Francesca's case, she initially tried to join the armed forces, however, because she was not old enough to join at the time, the recruiter recommended she complete a college course and join after that. Hence, although she describes 'falling' into beauty as a subject, it was the recruiter who initially directed her towards HE. Similarly, Fleur (who was an international student) originally had

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no desire to pursue HE and felt almost forced by her family to apply for a foundation degree. It was only after completing the foundation degree that, as Fleur explained, she felt she needed to go on to the top-up year:

but then when I've done (sic) my foundation degree, I had the feeling that that wasn't enough and I needed to get a job. There's so many people with master's and everything and I feel like the competition is really hard, so I thought at least I need to get a degree—a full degree.

Fleur, 23-year-old female HE in FE student

Although Fleur ended up completing her bachelor's degree, it is likely she would never have done so without her family's initial influence. Like Phoebe, Francesca and Fleur, other students in the Directed group generally did not feel they had any choice but to pursue HE, and their narratives centred on being *pushed and/or pulled* rather than *choosing* to go. Although some of them, similar to Francesca and Fleur, later made an active decision to complete their bachelor's degree, their initial decision to enter HE was instigated by others.

Conversely, students in the Drifters group decided to go to HE because they were not sure what else to do:

[I] didn't have a clue what I was going to do with my life because I didn't do A-levels...so then I came here because I thought it's quite a broad degree because I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do; it wasn't like too narrow for finding a job and stuff.

Lily, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

Like Phoebe above, Lily also expressed frustration that her school seemed to force people into university rather than explain the wide range of post-school options available to them. She reported not being treated very well by her school when she chose to leave before A-levels, and she struggled to figure out what to do between leaving school and ending up at her college. Phoebe also described friends of hers who would fall into the Drifters category:

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I've got so many friends that go to uni just because they don't know what they want to do with their life. I've got friends that are gonna stay right til the end because they've no idea what they want to do.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

As demonstrated by Lily's case and Phoebe's description, students in the Drifters category also exhibited a passive decision-making process (like students in the Directed group). However, they appear to *drift* or *fall* into HE rather than being steered towards it by an external force.

While the Directed and the Drifters consisted entirely of HE in FE students, the majority of the university students fall into the Destined group. Although the Destined also exhibited a more passive decision-making process than the mature students, their decision was more likely to be linked to their belief that pursuing HE was 'destiny' given their background and/or identity:

[Going to HE] kind of seemed like an inevitability. That was sort of the path which seemed obvious and, you know, which I was directed towards from a young age...I never wanted to do a vocational qualification, and I felt that going into the workplace before completing a university degree wouldn't be particularly useful in the long-term career prospects, so I thought university would be the best option.

Matthew, 22-year-old male university student

I've sort of always been interested in business and that sort of side of things and I've always wanted to work in the sort of business side of things, so it was just pretty standard for me to go and do a business degree really.

Edward, 22-year-old male university student

Although Matthew uses the word 'directed' in his response, expressing his pursuit of HE as an 'inevitability' frames it differently from those in the Directed group. Even though he claims he was directed, he also says that going to HE 'seemed obvious', which means he has embodied this direction for himself rather than being pushed or pulled by someone else. Similarly, Edward's use of the phrase 'pretty standard' implies that there was no reason to question whether going to HE was right for him. In general, the stories of the

Destined are grounded in the belief that going to university was never a matter of if, but when and where.

Taking the perspectives of the Directed, Drifters and Destined together, younger students' reasoning does not appear to be as linked to career-related goals as it is for mature students. Furthermore, unlike the mature students, who seemed relatively confident that a degree would be valuable, the younger students were unsure of the extent to which having a degree would be of immediate help to them in the labour market:

I think a degree definitely helps you get a job, but...I don't think it helps you straight out of university; I think you have to get your foot in the door to start with.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

I saw [a job advertisement] the other day that was for an assistant...they were looking for a junior marketing assistant. I was like that's pretty much a graduate position—they wanted a degree and three years' work experience, but it's like I can't get the experience because I can't get a job because I can't any experience because I can't get the job.¹²⁰

Lily, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

Phoebe reflects a sentiment expressed by many younger students, which could be described as a begrudging acceptance that a degree is probably a good idea in the long-term, even if it might not be of that much immediate help. At the same time, Lily explains the problem many graduates face in the short-term: many companies hiring 'graduates' now require both a degree and experience. However, many graduates do not have the experience required because they cannot get the jobs needed to gain experience without a degree. As a result of this catch-22 situation experienced by younger students, they tend to place a

¹²⁰ Although this quote sounds repetitive, it is an accurate representation of how Lily explained the situation. Likewise, other students interviewed would repeat the 'I can't get experience because I can't get a job' line repeatedly to demonstrate the vicious cycle of this dilemma.

lower value on the short-term benefits of a degree and approach HE with more scepticism than mature students.

Despite the overall similarity across age groups regarding initial HE decisions, one exception existed amongst the university students. One 24-year-old student, who was the oldest interviewee of the university student sample, was more like the mature students in her reasoning:

I'd taken two years out of university after my A-levels and I was just working in retail and I kind of decided I'd had enough of just the mundane sales assistant thing and I went for the manager position in store and I was turned down...I was a bit fed up with the lack of career progression.

Rosie, 24-year-old female university student

As Rosie demonstrates, it was her work experience rather than her age that influenced her decision-making process. Like other mature students in this study, she knew from employment experience that having a degree might not be the answer, but it would certainly give her more opportunities. Therefore, Rosie's story indicates that the differences in answers amongst students in this study might be directly linked to work experience rather than just to age alone. This example raises questions about the potential value work experience between school and university could have for students who are unsure what they would like to do.

6.3 A student's right to choose?

From the HE in FE perspective, one of the key problems with the idea of 'funding follow[ing] the decisions of learners' (BIS, 2011: 8) is that the students who go to HE in FE do not tend to choose going to college *over* a university. While this policy initiative is founded on the notion of student *choice*, HE in FE students tend to choose an institution based on *constraints*. This distinction is

important because 'where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to power and constraint' (Ball et al., 2002: 51). When someone *chooses*, they have more freedom and their preferences can be taken into account. However, when someone is *constrained*, their options are limited by necessity rather than by preference.

According to the questionnaire data for this study, the most important influence when looking at choice of institution for all students was 'It offered the particular course I wanted' (26 per cent of all students). However, an equally popular answer for university students was 'Reputation of the institution generally' (19 per cent of university students), whereas only one college student selected this. Conversely, the second most popular answer for college students was 'Location, because I could continue to live at home' (17 per cent of college students), whereas only one university student selected this. This difference clearly demonstrates the relative importance of location, and in particular being able to live at home, for college students compared with university students. University students can choose to take factors such as an institution's reputation into account, whereas this luxury is often not a reality for college students.

In researching students pursuing Access to HE courses,¹²¹ Reay, Ball and David (2002) argued that HE choice for mature students in particular is mediated by material, practical and psychological constraints. As they explain, '[c]hoice for a majority [of mature students] involved a process of finding out what you cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the

¹²¹ This research focused on the actual Access to HE diploma qualification, not access to HE more generally.

few options left' (ibid., p. 9). While this explanation certainly reflects the institutional decision-making process depicted by the mature students in this study, it also describes that of many younger HE in FE students. Although, like with initial HE decisions, there is some variance across age groups, very few HE in FE students in either age category select a college as their first choice institution. In fact, there is very little evidence of 'choice' being involved in this decision. Elsewhere, Reay, David and Ball (2005: 160) describe similar discrepancies between choice and constraint when examining HE choice according to social class, claiming that 'most of the students [in their research] from middle-class backgrounds presented choice as taken-for-granted, inevitable – in contrast to the chancy, uncertain process recounted by many working class students'.

One of the key findings from Parry et al.'s (2012: 15) study is directly linked to the relative presence or lack of constraints during the HE decision-making process. Of the 2,523 students they surveyed, two-thirds of them 'only applied to study at the college they were attending, and often their choices were limited and highly constrained, even when the college was their first choice' (ibid). Regardless of their particular circumstances, 'they were opting for a convenient and "safe" place to study', and some were thereby 'restricting their options and choices, consciously or unconsciously' (ibid). Further to this, because many of them 'had no, or very limited, experience of universities...they were largely unaware or indifferent to what universities could offer' (ibid). Those who were most likely to apply to university (29 per cent of the 2,523) were 'aged 20 and under, single, white, and came from families where at least one parent had been to university' (ibid). Taking all of these issues into

consideration, the authors questioned whether 'students were making an informed choice of institution' (ibid).

Although I also question whether some of the HE in FE students in this study made an informed choice of institution, their decisions must be considered within the context of the material, practical and psychological constraints (Reay, Ball and David, 2002) they faced when making them. While many different factors can fall into these categories of constraints, the discussion here will focus on one or two factors for each. Furthermore, the third category will focus on identity-based, rather than psychological, constraints. The material constraints section focuses on financial issues; practical constraints on time and prior attainment; and identity constraints on students' self-perception and beliefs about institutional hierarchies.

6.3.1 Material constraints

One of the more surprising findings of this study was the lack of concern students expressed regarding their student debt. Due to the research available on how debt aversion can influence decision-making (Callender, 2003; Ertl, Carasso and Holmes, 2013), I expected the prospect of debt to play a stronger constraining role for the students in this study than it did. During the interviews, a small number of college interviewees did point to the benefit of their course being cheaper than it would be at a university, which also emerged in the questionnaire data. According to this data, college students' fees averaged at £2,100 per year compared to £3,800 per year for university students. However, this factor did not appear to play a large part in the decision-making process for most of them. Those who did mention it often did

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so as an afterthought near the end of the interview (with one exception, who mentioned it at the beginning), following a discussion of all the other benefits offered to them by attending a college.

Although the questionnaire data revealed that the overwhelming majority of both college and university students selected 'Student loan' as their main source of funding for their course, neither group seemed overly concerned about how long it would take to pay it back:

To be honest, I don't actually care [how long it will take to pay off the debt]. I think the thing with it is that's a big misconception among a lot of students is that they feel like it's...like I don't worry about it being a debt if that makes sense. I think it's not the same as having you know loads of clothes on your credit card. You know...it's in a completely different league.

Rosie, 24-year-old female university student

Probably—15-20 years? I really haven't thought about it, but...I'd like to get it paid off.

Chloe, 24-year-old female HE in FE student

As both Rosie and Chloe express, students in this study appeared to be either unconcerned or apathetic about their student loans. In fact, interviewees were generally less conversant about this topic than almost any other topic covered during interviews. This issue is a particularly important one to note because, at least on the surface, one of the key selling points of HE in FE is that colleges can offer university-validated degrees for less money. However, this purported benefit does not seem to play into students' decision-making as much as it is believed to and therefore might not be the constraint it is perceived to be. This perspective is supported by Parry et al.'s (2012: 119) research, in which low fees was only the fourth most popular reason for students (28 per cent selected

it) in deciding to attend a college rather than a university.¹²²

Nevertheless, it is important to consider this finding against four related issues. First, these students began their course before fees were increased (in 2012) and therefore paid less than students who have since entered HE. Research about students due to enter HE in 2012, following the announcement of the fees increase, found that prospective debt did influence decision-making (Ertl, Carasso and Holmes, 2013). Second, students might have reflected differently on this issue during their final year than when they were originally making the decision. Third, this factor was not as readily discussed at Gardiner College, where many of the students' employers were paying their fees for them. Finally, according to the questionnaire, college students tend to rely less upon student loans to fund their course, possibly in part because of cheaper fees and also because as a group they use a wider variety of funding sources. Whereas university students taking the questionnaire either selected 'Student loan' or 'Money I don't have to repay from parents/partner/family' as their only two sources of funding, HE in FE students chose these as well as tuition fees grant (for part-time students), personal savings/investment, employer financial support and salary. Also, 37 per cent of the HE in FE students expected to graduate with no debt, whereas 36 per cent of university students expected to graduate with between £21,000-£25,000 worth of debt (only three HE in FE students thought they would graduate with this amount). Therefore, it is at least partially understandable why, for this group of HE in FE students, the cost of HE or associated debt is not as constraining as it could be.

¹²² The most popular reasons were 'The course I wanted to take was only available at a college' (34 per cent); 'I had already studied at a college' (33 per cent); and 'I thought I would get a lot of contact with lecturers and tutors at a college' (29 per cent). Students could select as many reasons as applied to their situation, which is why the percentages add up to over 100.

6.3.2 Practical constraints

As discussed at the beginning of this section about institutional decision-making, the location, and in particular the localness, of an institution is typically more important for HE in FE students than it is for university students. Possible reasons for this difference include the fact that college students are often attending HE alongside employment, meaning their educational institution must offer a flexible timetable and be easily accessible from their workplace. In addition, college students are more likely to have other competing commitments, such as children, to manage alongside their course. However, due to their role in widening participation and increasing access, colleges also make HE a possibility for students who do not have the qualifications to attend university. As a result of these issues, the practical constraints of time and prior attainment are prevalent in the decision-making process of many students who end up in HE in FE.

During interviews, mature students frequently described the need to find an institution with courses that fitted alongside their other commitments, such as those related to their children:

I've got two children, so it was time as well—where can I get to? Obviously our nurseries...open at a certain time in a morning and I can't leave the children at six o'clock to get anywhere else.

Lucy, 35-year-old female HE in FE student

Well, I'll tell you [why I chose this college]—it's a really stupid, simple reason—because I have a little girl, and it's the same timetable as the school.

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

For Lucy and Scarlett, attending HE is only possible because of the localness and timetable of their respective colleges. In fact, in Scarlett's case, she described how she originally considered going to the local university, which is

closer to her house than the college. However, since the university's timetable would have made it difficult for her to be available during her daughter's school holidays, the college's timetable (an aspect of the student experience which is discussed further in Course timetable^{7.2.1}) ended up being a key deciding factor.

Although children are often described as a constraining factor for mature HE in FE students, some students also experienced employment-related constraints:

[A]nyone who gets trained as a manager at my [work] comes here...they didn't really give me any options to choose anywhere.

Isaac, 43-year-old male HE in FE student

In Isaac's case, if he wanted to pursue HE, he had to go to Gardiner College. Therefore, the more important decision for him was whether to pursue HE in the first place rather than where to pursue it.

Unlike mature students, the institutional constraints faced by younger students are more likely to be linked to prior attainment¹²³ rather than to family or work. Of the 11 college interviewees who were aged 24 and under during their final year, five of them originally applied to university but were not accepted. Another one of the 11 had actually been accepted and completed a year at university before deciding to go to the college instead. Of the remaining five, three did not have the qualifications to apply to university and the final two actively chose to attend college over university. Hence, although there is evidence that some students choose to attend college over university, the majority go to college as a way to pursue HE *instead* of university.

¹²³ Although many mature students are also technically constrained by prior attainment, this issue is often secondary to their other constraints. Even if and when they have the appropriate qualifications to enter university, they are less likely to choose it due to the fact it would be more difficult to balance with other commitments.

All of these stories, however, are in stark contrast to the practical factors university students point to as influencing their institutional choice:

I went up for an Open Day and the facility looked great and it seemed like a really nice town to live in and also I wanted to move away from home and the other university I was considering was about two miles away from where I live, so I decided to go [elsewhere] for my degree.

Harry, 20-year-old male university student

Obviously the content which would be discussed within the course, the facilities of the university, the price of accommodation in the area around the university, so you know cost of living basically, and that's about it really.

Matthew, 22-year-old male university student

[This university] seemed like the better option because it provided a good balance of a new city which I didn't know...and it was a campus uni, which I was really attracted to as well. And also as well just to add to that, [this university] scored highly on the student satisfaction reports for the course, so that was also another factor that led me towards choosing [this university].

Archie, 21-year-old male university student

As explained by Harry, Matthew and Archie, university students are more likely to explore factors such as course content, campus location, university facilities and reputation when deciding where to go for HE. These examples clearly demonstrate the distinction between choice and constraint exhibited at the beginning of this section, because they show that many university students operate within a system of preferences when making institutional decisions: they can choose which institutions to apply to based on which they like best rather than the one that can accommodate their particular circumstances.

6.3.3 Identity constraints

Regardless of age, the majority of the HE in FE students in this study expressed the belief that university would not have been right for them. While some pointed to the fact that they simply do not like to study and would not

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have thrived in the university environment, others conveyed a lack of interest in what universities have to offer in terms of living in halls and participating in group social activities. One of the most common reasons given by HE in FE students of all ages for why they do not belong at university is that they do not identify as 'academic' people. As a consequence, they feel distant from the academic identity associated with universities:

I wasn't particularly academic at school; I really struggled.

Chloe, 24-year-old female HE in FE student

I've never been particularly academic...I have a younger brother, and he's the academic one, I'm the socially like outgoing one.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

Both Chloe and Charlie pointed to not being 'particularly academic' as one reason why the college environment suited them. This reason was not the only one given for why they went to college instead of university, but it is an important one to draw out. This separation they feel from the academic identity, and the expectations of performance that seem to come with it, are part of what makes HE in FE feel safe and approachable for these students.

This distance from all things 'academic' is even more notable in mature students, who can struggle even to associate themselves with the word 'education' again:

I'm not an educational person in any way, shape or form—I'd always been told I was stupid and so I never thought I could do [a degree], so I always worked from leaving school because I didn't get any GCSEs.

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

Clearly, the messages Scarlett received as a child and teenager discouraged her from pursuing education further. However, she became a remarkable example of a student who went from not envisioning herself as 'educational' to completing her bachelor's and continuing on to a master's. Stories such as hers

are essential to demonstrating how identity constraints can play a role in preventing students from pursuing HE in the first place. Furthermore, these stories offer evidence as to why, even if given a choice, students might be inclined to choose a college over a university. The college not only offers what is perceived to be a more supportive environment with lower entry requirements; it also provides the opportunity to begin with lower level qualifications rather than jumping straight onto a degree course.

This reasoning makes even more sense when looking at the prior qualifications students in this study had when entering HE. Whereas 85 per cent of those college students who took the questionnaire had a foundation degree, none of the university students had one. Conversely, 97 per cent of the university students had A-levels, whereas only 34 per cent of the college students had these qualifications. Therefore, most college students in this study did not enter HE by what is considered the 'traditional' academic route.

Despite their sense of distance from the academic identity, college students value the fact that their institution can offer a university-validated degree:

[Y]ou're able to attend college, it's in a convenient location, and because it's run on a university network, you actually get the [university] degree at the end of it.

Chloe, 24-year-old female HE in FE student

I would've chosen business in any other university. However, I would say I'm pleased with choosing this college itself, of course...with its relation with [the partner university]. I wouldn't want as, as a person to get just a degree which says [the college's name]. No disrespect to [the college] but however, it's the market—there is a competition. People are getting degrees from different universities and master's and there's no jobs, so I would like at least my qualification to be certified by a university. But we are getting the same, you know, we get treated here the same as we would at the university.

Omar, 30-year-old male HE in FE student

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As Chloe and Omar explain, students are keen to benefit from being associated with the university identity even if they do not feel they belong there. Omar's quote in particular demonstrates a resistance to being associated with his college, even though he valued his college experience.

However, even students who actively chose to attend the college do not want to necessarily be associated with it:

Yeah, sort of having that [partnership] sort of affirmed my choice really because I think if it had been a degree accredited through a college, I probably wouldn't have done it just because the snobbery I guess a little bit because it sounds better if you've got a university degree rather than a college degree in itself and I'm quite—I'm a bit of a snob.

Francesca, 22-year-old female HE in FE student

Francesca did not even consider applying to university, yet she finds the idea of a college degree off-putting. This perspective exhibits not only her awareness of others' beliefs about the hierarchy of HE institutions, but also that she believes in this hierarchy as well.

6.3.4 Exceptions to theme of constraints

Notably, not every student in this study chose to go to college on the basis of their constraints. At one institution in particular, Bennett College, half of the students interviewed made an active decision to pursue HE at the college instead of at a university. Their reasons for doing so varied but included not wanting to live out, distaste for the 'university lifestyle', the college offering a cheaper university degree and the college being more 'convenient' in terms of location and timetable. For these students in particular, the cost and convenience of the college were more salient selling points than they were for the other students, for whom convenience in particular was often a necessity. Taking into account that at least two of these students were accepted at

universities and chose to go to college instead, there is some evidence that not all HE in FE students are forced by their circumstances into this option. However, for the majority of the sample studied, constraints undoubtedly played a major role in their decision-making process.

6.4 Other aspects of HE decisions

Although choice of course is not strictly relevant to why students choose one type of institution or another, it remains a key part of the decision-making process and thus requires some attention. The question of course is a tricky one because the interview and questionnaire questions did not indicate whether 'course' meant 'qualification' or 'subject', which left it open to interpretation. Therefore, some students might have considered course to mean 'business' whereas others might have taken it to mean 'bachelor's degree'. In any case, more differences between these two groups of students emerge when considering the reasons students gave for choosing their course.

While both groups shared the most popular answer, which in this case was 'I think it will lead to good employment opportunities in general' (45 per cent), they differed completely in their second most important factor. For university students, the second most popular answer was 'I am interested in the content of the course' (26 per cent). However, for college students, the second most popular answer was tied at 15 per cent each between 'I could fit the course around existing work commitments', which no university students selected, and 'I need to complete this course to enter a particular profession/occupation', which only one university student selected.

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When asked in the questionnaire if students would choose the same course if starting again, the most popular answer across all students and for each individual group was 'Yes, probably' (48 per cent overall; 46 per cent for college students; 50 per cent for university students) followed by 'Yes, definitely' (27 per cent overall; 29 per cent for college students; 25 per cent for university students). When given the option to choose a different course in an open response question, 50 per cent of university students (16 students) and 37 per cent of college students (15 students) wrote completely different subjects, ranging from a different business specialisation (such as Human Resources) to courses in beauty, midwifery and science. Therefore, students were extremely divided as to whether they had made the right course decision.

Setting these responses aside to reflect on why they chose business as a subject in the first place, students across both types of institution were similar in their reasoning. The majority of students pointed to the broad applicability of business and their confidence that, because it applies to anything and everything, it would inevitably lead to a job. In particular, students who either did not know what they wanted to do or were concerned about finding a job took comfort in the belief that a working knowledge of business can help one pursue a diverse range of opportunities:

I kind of thought that with a knowledge in business and management, and an interest in anything, you've got a job. You know like if I had a degree in management, but I have an interest in fashion, I can open a fashion store and probably succeed. Whereas if I had a degree in fashion and no idea how to run the store, you can be as creative and as talented as you like, but not get anywhere.

Rosie, 24-year-old female university student

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I decided to choose business because...I hadn't really got any prior knowledge of what area I wanted to specifically be in and I thought business was quite generic and you know you could apply it across lots of sectors—it's very broad—so it wasn't necessarily something I was hugely interested in or knew a lot about, but I thought it was a good option as I didn't know what I wanted to do at that point.

Chloe, 24-year-old female HE in FE student

Rosie and Chloe exhibit the fact that many students see business as a kind of 'catch-all' subject. They believe that if anyone is unsure of what they want to do, choosing business is a practical, safe option. However, as Chloe's quote shows, even if a student saw business knowledge as useful for employment prospects, it was not unusual for them to admit a lack of experience or interest.

Another group of students, including many college students, either had business-related experience or had a family background in business (i.e. parents who worked in business) that influenced their decision:

I'd always enjoyed business. Both my mum and dad's been in business...my dad's ran car repair garages and my mum's been like managers and stuff, so I've been brought up on business really. Been surrounded with it.

Max, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

[I've] got lots of experiences in businesses and every [business] I go in I'm obviously—I must know what I'm doing because I always end up at the top when I'm done.

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

In general, students like Max and Scarlett did not consider any other subjects before settling on business and were committed to pursuing jobs directly related to business after graduation. However, there did seem to be a perception amongst this group of students that exposure to business is equivalent to being *good* at business, which is not necessarily the case.

6.5 Conclusions about students' HE decisions

For the students in this study, initial HE decisions are best examined through the lens of age. Whereas mature students, the Deciders, tended to have clear career-related reasons for pursuing HE, younger students described being pushed or pulled into HE by someone else (the Directed), falling haphazardly into HE (the Drifters) or following a seemingly inevitable path to HE (the Destined). Therefore, mature students demonstrated an active decision-making process whereas younger students exhibited a more passive decision-making process. This finding is also supported by previous research, which found that '[o]lder students generally have clearer reasons [than younger students] for choosing their course' (Purcell et al., 2008: xiii).

An institutional pattern also emerged among these groups. While the first three groups—the Deciders, the Directed and the Drifters—consisted entirely of college students, the Destined exclusively included university students. Without exception, only university students described their entry into HE as inevitable (though they demonstrated a more active decision-making process when selecting an institution). As such, the presence or absence of this narrative (portraying entry into HE as inevitable) was a key differentiating factor between university and college students in this study. The one exception was a mature university student, who aligned more closely with the Deciders (a group consisting only of mature students) than the Destined.

When deciding on an institution, HE in FE students of all ages face more material, practical and identity constraints than university students. While university students select an institution from a basis of choice, HE in FE students tend to do so from a basis of constraint. In some cases, the constraints

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faced by college students in this study were such that they could either go to college or not go to HE at all; most of them did not have the freedom to choose the 'best' HE provider, only the one, if any, that could accommodate their particular circumstances. For the majority of these college students, the bigger decision was often *whether* to go to HE rather than *where* to go. Though constraints can be problematic for most HE in FE students, they are especially acute for mature students, who worry about the risk for themselves and their families (if applicable) of going to HE (Davies and Williams, 2001; Davies, Osborne and Williams, 2002). It therefore makes sense that this group would be more deliberate in their decision-making process and thus comprise the Deciders category described above.

University students, though, placed much more emphasis on what they wanted (rather than what they needed) from a particular institution. In this study, university students described characteristics such as campus location, course content, facilities and institutional reputation as being particularly important in deciding where to go to HE. Similarly, comparing their findings with those of the Futuretrack study (introduced in 3.2), Parry et al. (2012: 126) found that university students (compared to college students) were more concerned about their institution's reputation and its location in terms of being 'in an attractive and interesting place' when deciding where to go for HE. In contrast, college students in Parry et al.'s (ibid.) research, as well as many of them in this study, placed more emphasis on the proximity of an institution to their current home.

Irrespective of age, type of institution or other differentiating factors, education tends to be seen by individuals as an investment (Brown, Lauder and

Ashton, 2011). Although investments are inherently risky, with education there seems to be 'a blue chip kind of certainty about it: invest in your education and you *will* be better off, not you *might* be better off' (Davies, Osborne and Williams, 2002: 81, emphasis theirs). This belief is often particularly prevalent with regard to HE. Nevertheless, although most students in this study, regardless of age or type of institution, framed attending HE as an investment in their future, younger students expressed a more sceptical attitude than mature students as to whether their degree would make a significant difference to their employment outcomes. Most mature students saw their degree as crucial to career progression, whereas younger students simply portrayed it as necessary to be competitive in the labour market. In other words, mature students described degrees as a way to get *up* the ladder, while younger students saw them as a way to get *on* the ladder. In addition to age influencing their perspective on this issue, work experience also played a role: those students with more extensive work experience seemed more confident than those with limited or no work experience that having a degree could contribute to their labour market success. This finding held true regardless of the student's type of institution.

Along these lines, Gewirtz and Cribb (2009: 12) argue that the act of 'purchasing' HE

is perhaps best understood to be more like buying a house or stocks and shares than consumable goods, in that it represents an investment that might yield dividends in the long term or by contrast may lose its value.

Due to the number of graduates entering the worldwide labour market combined with the global competition for high-skill, low-price labour, a bachelor's degree is no longer a ticket to a 'good job'. Instead, a first degree is

now just a ticket to the *competition* for a good job. Given this situation, it is understandable why potential students, no matter what their age or level of prior experience, might feel pressurised to go to HE, even for those who remain sceptical about the potential payoff. A degree might not offer 100 per cent chance of a good job, but not having a degree decreases the possibility even further.

Interestingly, though, despite the fact that students tended to be pursuing HE for reasons related to their future employment, the connection between colleges and employers is not one of the reasons students gave for choosing to go to a college. Likewise, Parry et al. (2012: 135) also found that the students in their study were not 'particularly drawn to colleges because of the purported distinctive missions of [FECs] compared with [HEIs], especially in terms of colleges' employer engagement activities'. This finding leads to questions regarding whether bachelor's degree students benefit from colleges' relationships from employers in the same way that students at other levels within the college (such as those who want to pursue apprenticeships) might.

More broadly, it is clear from examining students' decisions about HE that the decision-making process undertaken by those students who end up at colleges is not really comparable to that of those students who go to universities. To use terminology from Holland et al. (1998), which was introduced as part of the conceptual framework in 4.2, students in each group are moved into different places by separate sets of forces. Hence, before they even enter HE, a boundary begins to emerge between those who go to one type of institution and those who go to another. With this divide in place, students at

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universities and colleges are on distinct trajectories through HE before they even start their course.

7 FINDINGS II: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF HE

7.1 Researching students' experiences of HE

From exploring students' decisions about whether and where to pursue HE, this chapter turns to students' experiences of HE. In addition to there being a lack of knowledge about HE in FE at the first degree level, there are two more reasons why exploring the experiences of bachelor's students in particular is important. First, the increasing policy focus on the student perspective, and in particular the student experience and student satisfaction, arguably makes this aspect of the HE student lifecycle one of the most essential for institutions and policymakers to comprehend. Second, because first degree students account for the largest percentage of HE students in England in terms of qualification level (HESA, 2014), their experiences are valuable to understand. The prioritisation of their viewpoints is evidenced by the fact that large-scale tools used for gathering HE student feedback, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), are aimed at final year undergraduates rather than focusing on other qualifiers. Hence, through providing data on the experiences of HE in FE students at the bachelor's level and exploring how these compare with the experiences of university students, this chapter makes a clear contribution to this area.

The remainder of the chapter begins by exploring some of the differences that emerged between colleges and universities during data collection, followed by a brief discussion of the tension that exists between HE and FE within colleges. Next, the relevant data is presented in two sections: one which explores the course structure, content and assessment of business bachelor's courses at colleges and one which focuses on the support and resources available to students at colleges during their degree courses. Data is

presented in these two sections to reflect the categories of questions students are asked when participating in the NSS.

Since the focus of this research is on the student lifecycle from the perspective of final year students (and recent graduates), and the NSS is concerned with evaluating final year students' satisfaction with their course, it makes sense to explore students' experiences using these categories. Furthermore, these categories link into some of the larger issues at work in the field of HE in FE: policy; teaching and learning; and quality of provision. The NSS categories are divided as follows (in the order in which they appear on the survey): the teaching on the student's course; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning and resources; personal development; and overall satisfaction. While the first five categories are covered within the sections below, personal development and overall satisfaction are discussed in Chapter 8. Although data from university students' experiences is used throughout, the focus remains on the HE in FE bachelor's student experience. The chapter closes with some conclusions about students' experiences before moving into the final findings chapter about students' employment expectations and outcomes.

7.1.1 Some differences between universities and colleges

As someone who had never been in an FE college in England before starting this research, I immediately noticed how the physical environment of a college differed from that of many universities. While there are some similarities between these two types of institutions, such as both being organised by subject area (e.g. classrooms and offices for similar subjects are,

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for the most part, located near each other), on the whole they feel very different from each other when visiting them in person. Whereas the universities I visited had sprawling campuses and large lecture halls, colleges were more physically concentrated, usually located in one large building or a collection of medium-sized buildings, with smaller classrooms. Navigating around relatively large universities required consulting maps or seeking help from students or staff, whereas at colleges, I typically checked in at a central reception desk and was escorted, often down colour or number-coded corridors, to the appropriate area of the college. Oftentimes, the HE 'area' was not a separate building¹²⁴ but rather a particular corridor or series of rooms dedicated to HE provision. It was more typical for colleges to be divided by subject area than by level of provision. Similarly, in most cases HE students did not have a separate library or IT room and therefore frequently used the same study spaces as FE students.

Aside from the physical characteristics of these institutions, another noticeable difference at the colleges was the 'tribes' of students walking around together, often in uniforms; it was very clear who were the mechanics, the pastry chefs, the beauty therapists and so on. In contrast, at the universities, it was not as easy to tell at first glance which subject a student studied. At the colleges, the only cases in which it was often difficult to determine students' courses without speaking to them was when meeting A-level or HE students, both of whom would be considered 'academic', rather than vocational, groups within the college context. While at the universities I could easily blend in as a student or staff member, the colleges usually required me to register as a

¹²⁴ Exceptionally, in one college I visited, HE provision was housed in a separate building which was only accessible to HE students. This access was controlled via student cards, which could be used by HE students to swipe themselves into the building.

visitor and wear a badge with my name and the name of the college staff member responsible for me during my visit. At some colleges, I was also required to confirm that I had undergone a Disclosure and Barring Service check. Although these protective measures are completely understandable, especially at colleges attended by students under 16 years old, they do influence the environment and contribute to a sense of culture that is different from many universities. In particular, attempting to integrate a micro-academic culture within a mostly vocational environment can lead to a tangible tension between HE and FE, which can then manifest itself within the student experience.

7.1.2 The tension between HE and FE within colleges

As discussed in Chapter 6, although some HE in FE students choose college over university, for the majority of college students, going to HE means going to college; university is simply not a viable option. For many students, there are clear benefits linked to being at college instead of university. Yet at the same time, the pursuit of HE, regardless of where it takes place, plays a significant role in the 'imagined futures' (Ball, Macrea and Maguire, 1999; Goodlad and Thompson, 2007) of HE in FE students and, consequently, carries with it certain expectations about the student experience. These expectations include both practical matters, such as having 'discrete and designated spaces within which the study of HE can take place' (Burns, 2007), and more abstract concerns, such as the existence of an HE ethos or culture (Rapley, 2014). Although these expectations are sometimes evident amongst sub-degree HE in FE students, they are arguably more pronounced amongst top-up year HE in FE

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students. Becoming a bachelor's student, and undergoing the stressful transition this progression often involves for HE in FE students (Greenbank, 2007), carries meaning for those who choose this path. However, because '[c]reating and sustaining an HE ethos is a potentially resource-intensive undertaking' (Jones, 2006a: 1), colleges cannot always meet the practical or abstract expectations that students might have.

Thus, one can begin to imagine how a student's HE experience might differ in a college compared with a university. Indeed, previous research explores what defines the divide between the two sectors (West, 2006) of which these institutions are a part and the HE offered by both (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004). However, the sharp lines often thought to exist between HE at colleges compared with HE at universities are sometimes found to be tenuous (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004: 18-19). In other words, what is believed to make FE, and the HE it offers, distinctive does not always hold true under investigation. For example, although HE in FE students are said to have more contact hours with staff than they would for a similar course in HE, the evidence indicates this is not always the case (*ibid.*, p.16). One undeniable difference, however, is the fact that HE usually represents a minority of the provision available at colleges. Over half of the colleges (151 out of 283) who are HE providers only have between 100-500 HE students (Parry et al., 2012: 66). Partially because of these small numbers, HE provision typically remains at least somewhat separate from FE within a college; the primary difference from one institution to another is not whether they are separated but to what extent. For college students, this divide between HE and FE can, and often does, result

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in tension both within the students themselves and within the physical spaces they inhabit in their institutions.

Although the degree to which students must reconcile the worlds of FE and HE varies from one institution to another, students' top-up year experiences at colleges are often at least somewhat defined by how their institution manages, and how they as students learn to navigate, the boundary between HE and FE within their college. This dynamic is one of the most significant differences between bachelor's students' experiences at colleges versus universities.

The terminology students use to describe their experience is just one example of the ways in which this tension manifests itself: while many college students in this study referred to different phases of their HE journey according to the qualification they were pursuing at the time (e.g. 'When I was doing the foundation degree...'), university students referred to numbered years (e.g. 'What I was in my first year...'). Whereas HE in FE students typically called the people who taught them as 'teachers' or 'tutors', university students tended to call them 'lecturers'.

Interestingly, despite these clear discrepancies, many college students used the words 'college' and 'university' interchangeably rather than choosing one or the other. For example, although Phoebe (20-year-old female HE in FE student) was explicit throughout her interview about why she came to college *instead* of university and even talked about how she had friends who 'went to uni' rather than college, she also said 'I'm the first one in my family to go to university' and that she would like to 'get...a trading/buying job out of uni'. Therefore, while college students might use the vocabulary associated with FE

when discussing their experiences, at least some of them clearly feel comfortable referring to their experience overall as a 'university' one. Indeed, there is evidence that when describing themselves,

[c]ollege students most frequently identified with the label of 'university student', especially younger students taking a [b]achelor's degree and studying full-time. However, where they had an alternative occupational identify (sic) to call upon, they opted for that instead. Consequently, only a small minority—around 16%—identified with being called a 'college student' (Parry et al., 2012: 157).

However, what remains unclear is whether this word choice is for themselves, because they identify as university students, or for others, because explaining HE in FE can be complicated; an issue which HE in FE participants elsewhere have raised (Hudson and Berzins, 2011: 21-22). For instance, students like Alexander (22-year-old male HE in FE student) said that 'people don't assume that colleges offer...degrees', which can make it difficult to explain to those who may not have heard of this arrangement previously. Consequently, it is easy to see why it may be more straightforward to claim to be at university.

While it is essential to explore the effects this tension has on students and their experiences, it is equally important to uncover the constructive aspects of the college environment for students. Both sides of this equation are explored in this chapter through describing what students give up and gain through pursuing HE in a college environment.

7.2 Course structure, content and assessment

One of the differences about the bachelor's student experience at colleges versus universities is in how the HE courses at each are structured, including the overall course timetable, course content and type of assessment. While the course structure at colleges reflects the fact that many HE in FE students have

external commitments, it also exposes the lack of resources colleges have available to dedicate to their bachelor's courses.

7.2.1 Course timetable

As discussed in the last chapter, the course timetable offered by an institution can be a key factor in the decision-making of prospective students with regard to whether and where to pursue HE. In fact, for some HE in FE students, the concept of 'localness' refers to 'accessibility of the timetable and course organisation' rather than to where a college itself is actually located (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004: 21). Reflecting this need to be accessible, timetabled provision for full-time HE courses at colleges tends to be concentrated on one, two or three days per week to restrict the number of days students are required to be at their institution. For part-time courses, provision can be scheduled during the evening rather than during the day.

Of the colleges included in this study, three (Collins, Bennett and Forster College) required students to attend timetabled lectures or seminars two days per week and one (Gardiner College) required students to attend just one day per week. In contrast, the university students in this study typically needed to be at their institution for at least one timetabled session between three to five days per week. The amount of time actually spent in a lecture, seminar or tutorial on the days they needed to be at university varied from a couple of hours for a lecture to most of the day if they had both morning and afternoon sessions to attend. In addition to what was required by their course, many of them also spent time at their institution to visit the library, students' union or

other campus services. A few also participated in clubs or societies that met on a regular basis in university buildings.

Although this description could give the impression that college students, by nature of having a more condensed timetable, receive more in-person contact time than university students, this is not necessarily the case. According to the data (from both interviews and the questionnaire), the average number of contact and self-study hours per week¹²⁵ does not differ substantially according to type of institution. For contact hours, college students reported an average of 11 hours per week, just one hour more than the ten hours reported by university students. This finding supports a similar one from Parry et al. (2012: 16), who also reported (though with higher averages) a one hour difference in terms of face-to-face contact at colleges, which averaged 16 hours per week, and universities, which averaged 15 hours per week.¹²⁶ Although these numbers do not account for any contact time students receive outside of timetabled provision (such as one-to-one tuition or informal meetings with tutors), the fact that the difference in contact hours is so small in some cases is noteworthy. As Parry et al. (2012: 16) point out, 'the number of hours of face-to-face contact with teaching staff at colleges compared with those studying at universities [is] another espoused difference between colleges and [HEIs]'. While colleges generally do offer a timetable that is seemingly more compatible

¹²⁵ These numbers derived from averaging students' responses to the following question for contact hours: 'How many hours in total each week (during term time) do you normally spend attending timetabled lectures, seminars or tutorials related to your course? If this varies from week to week, please give an average'. The question about self-study hours used the same structure but asked about hours spent 'studying outside of lectures, seminars or tutorials'.

¹²⁶ The average for college students comes from empirical work conducted by Parry et al. (2012). The average for university students was reported by Parry et al. (ibid.) on the basis of other studies that they consulted.

with non-student commitments, college students do not seem to attend a significantly higher amount of timetabled provision than university students.

In terms of self-study hours, university students reported an average of 15 hours per week, which was just an hour more than the 14 hours reported by college students. Both of these figures are in a similar region to the 13-14.4 hours per week of self-study reported by undergraduates in other studies (e.g. Purcell et al., 2009: 35). Parry et al. (2012: 137) also reported a similar, though slightly higher, self-study figure for bachelor's students at colleges, who studied independently for approximately 16 hours per week. Hence, as with contact hours, students across different types of institution do not claim there is a substantial difference in self-study hours.

7.2.2 Course content and assessment

Two more key differences in the bachelor's degree course structure at colleges and universities are found in the course content available to students and how their work is assessed. There are four notable discrepancies here. First, since many university students have the opportunity to specialise from their first year, a student might choose to pursue a degree in Accounting, Economics or Marketing rather than a general business degree. While college students report choosing a specialism when it comes to writing their dissertations, the option to specialise in a subject overall was not available at the colleges in this study. As a consequence, the modules taken by university students in their final year can be highly specific relative to those taken by college students completing their top-up year.

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Second, HE in FE students do not tend to have a choice in the modules they take. Even if a college student is not interested in a particular subject, they must still complete the module for it. While university students also have requirements to meet and do not have complete freedom when it comes to modules, they do have some choice. For example, students in this study who attended Bingley University chose one elective per year, which could either be from a predetermined list of business modules or from a wide range of modules available in other subjects across the university.

Third, university students are more likely to have a clear option to complete a year abroad, work placement or internship as part of their course. Such opportunities are both integrated into the structure of university courses and, for the most part, well resourced. At Bingley University, an entire staff team is dedicated to helping business students find work placements, internships and general career training. Although students still have to do the work of applying and interviewing for placements, available opportunities are widely advertised and students can have their CV reviewed or undergo a practice interview. In contrast, many colleges do not have the resources to seek out, supervise and regulate such opportunities in the same way, which means college students generally have a much harder time obtaining them. Many of the college students interviewed who did complete a work placement or internship sought it out on their own, leading to mixed results as to how useful it was (an issue discussed more in 8.2.3). This situation is further complicated by the fact that as many college students already maintain part or full-time jobs alongside their course, their opportunities are further restricted compared to students who are not working.

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Finally, HE courses at universities and colleges, in some cases, differ in terms of how they are assessed. While assessment varies across institutions, and even across different modules within the same institution, colleges are generally less likely to set exams than universities, where exams are commonplace. Of the colleges in this study, two assessed courses by both assignments and examinations (Bennett College and Gardiner College) while the other two (Collins College and Forster College) assessed courses by assignments only. Both universities required students to sit exams for at least some modules, if not all. Assignments at both colleges and universities usually included a combination of individual essays, presentations and group work.

7.2.3 Similarities in course structure across colleges and universities

Despite the many differences in course structure between colleges and universities, both types of institution hold two things in common in this regard. The first is that almost all students were required to take some form of personal and/or professional skills development modules. The one exception to this was at Gardiner College, where the entire cohort consisted of full-time professionals. The second is that all students were required to complete a research dissertation by the end of their final year, which typically counted for a significant portion of their final degree classification.

7.3 Support and resources

Taking into account the material, practical and identity constraints (explored in 6.3) which many HE in FE students face when entering HE, feeling supported in their academic endeavours is essential to their success. Although many different support mechanisms might be available throughout their HE

experiences, relationships with others emerged as one of the key sources of support for students in this study. In particular, HE in FE students discussed relationships with college staff, with other students and with family members, particularly those with whom they were living at the time, as the most important in helping them during their course. The link between students' relationships and the self-confidence they develop during HE is so strong that it is arguably an essential aspect of students completing their HE in FE courses.

7.3.1 Relationships with staff, other students and family

7.3.1.1 Relationships with staff

Considering the structure of HE in FE course timetables combined with the typical size of bachelor's cohorts in colleges, there is little doubt that the college environment encourages closer interaction than what is available at many (though not all) universities.¹²⁷ As Parry et al. (2012: 134, 146) explain, while college students might not choose a college solely on the basis of its learning environment, these institutions do tend to provide 'a more personal learning environment than may be available to students in higher education institutions'. Whereas university students might spend six hours each week in lectures with hundreds of other students, college students might spend two full days together each week in a cohort of twelve people. The latter situation is clearly more likely to foster relationships with staff and provide students with a sense of support.

¹²⁷ Clearly there are exceptions to this discrepancy at universities where smaller tutorials play a larger role in undergraduate teaching. In this study, the reported tutorial or seminar groups at the two universities included were larger in size than the entire cohort at the colleges included.

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When discussing this topic during interviews, HE in FE students frequently compared their personal experience with what they imagined it would be like at a university:

[At the college,] it's like being at school; it's a lot more close-knit, so you get a lot more feedback from your tutors...all the tutors know you...there's a lot more—it's like a close-knit community kind of thing. Whereas you know like, I mean I've never been to uni so I wouldn't know, but you're all like stuck in a big massive room aren't you with like 200 people, whereas here it's a lot more closer (sic) and you know everybody a lot more personally.

Max, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

As far as like academic support and stuff...we are quite lucky in the sense of speaking to people that have gone to universities and stuff like that, it's not personal...they haven't got very much time to help you, also because [here] it's quite a small course, it's quite good in the sense that like for example I've had specific teachers that have been on the journey with us all the way through, which is nice because you're familiar with them and you feel as if you can maybe open up to them a little bit more as well.

Poppy, 26-year-old female HE in FE student

Although Max and Poppy explain the benefits of staff support differently, both feed into the overall importance of being 'known'. For Max, being known as an individual is embedded within being part of a 'close-knit community', which suggests a sense of safety and belonging. Similarly, for Poppy, the significance of being known is tied to students and staff being on a journey through HE *together* and working in partnership. Since she is 'familiar' with the staff teaching her, she feels that she can potentially 'open up to them a little bit more'. For both of these students, the personal environment offered by the college is in direct opposition to the more anonymous environment provided at universities, where one might feel 'stuck in a big massive room' or like 'they haven't got much time to help you'.

Given the identity constraints that many HE in FE students face when pursuing HE, their relationships with tutors can also be crucial when they are

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considering whether to persist with it. When Abigail described how she nearly left HE before completing her foundation degree, she explained that she stayed after being encouraged by her tutors:

When I started the foundation [degree], I wobbled massively in the first two to three months and I really was on my way out...but as it happened, I had two...tutors who sat with me [to talk about it] and I carried on.

Abigail, 39-year-old female HE in FE student

As a business owner and a mother, Abigail made significant sacrifices in terms of her time and lifestyle in order to pursue HE. Further to this, she found the adjustment to being in education again, and particularly being in HE, more difficult than anticipated. Without the dedicated support of tutors who both knew and respected Abigail's situation, it is uncertain whether someone in her circumstances would have continued.

Similarly, Phoebe described how her relationship with her tutors contributed to her decision to stay at the college rather than go to a university for her top-up year:

[The tutors] are always willing to help, which is another reason why I thought it would be a good idea to stay here, because obviously it's smaller classes so you get more one-to-one and...they're always willing to help you with stuff...whereas if I went to [the local university], it's so much bigger classes, [and] you don't get the sort of personal treatment that you would here.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

As one of the few college students in this study who had the A-levels needed in order to go to university, the influence Phoebe's tutors had in her decision to stay is noteworthy. The importance of tutors' influence is further confirmed by other students in this study, such as Charlie (introduced in 5.2.1 as the HE in FE student who completed one year of a bachelor's course at a university before

switching to a college). When I asked Charlie the main differences between the university and college, he immediately pointed to his relationship with tutors:

Well the fact that you can actually sit down with one of your tutors on a one-to-one basis every day if you want to. And if I have a problem...I've got their phone numbers, email addresses...you just don't get that at uni.

Charlie, 24 year-old male HE in FE student

As Charlie describes, the availability and willingness of tutors to help students on an as-needed basis was noticeably different to his experience of arranging meetings with university lecturers during limited office hours. In addition to complimenting the availability of their tutors, various students also told stories about tutors helping them find work placements, going to interviews with them, repeatedly providing feedback on rough drafts of assignments before coursework due dates and many other examples of their dedication to their students. As demonstrated by many students in the study, but in particular Abigail, Phoebe and Charlie, the more personal learning environment offered by HE in FE tutors plays a fundamental role in keeping students both in HE and at the college.

7.3.1.1.1 The pressure on staff in being supportive

Despite the clear benefits of close relationships with staff for students, this support comes at a cost to staff. Namely, because HE in FE courses are either taught by tutors who have separate HE *and* FE teaching responsibilities or, alternatively, are taught by a team of tutors, some of whom focus solely on HE and some of whom focus on FE, from the student's perspective, the style of delivery can be inconsistent. In this study, this theme was particularly prevalent at Bennett College, where students described how this dynamic affected their experience:

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I think it's maybe hard, maybe harder at the college because it really—it's not identified itself as [HE or FE]. It's trying to do [HE] when it's really still stuck in [FE]...all the way through that's been the main problem with being at college.

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

We're doing a higher education course in a primarily FE college...there's no clear divide of the two. So, you know, some days you'll be spoon fed everything like...an A-level student...and then other days, from the same person, you'll be told that "Oh, we don't offer any assistance—it's all independent study". There's no constant with it.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

Both Scarlett and Charlie clearly demonstrate the awareness students have of the tension resulting from an unclear HE/FE boundary within the college. From Scarlett's perspective, Bennett College was trying to develop its HE identity while remaining a mostly FE college. When I asked her to provide an example, she described a number of situations where it was clear the tutors had not decided or did not know how to handle certain aspects of HE provision, such as how to teach students to do academic referencing. As a result, rather than having a single, unified response when students would ask about referencing, tutors gave conflicting advice.

In a similar vein to Scarlett, Charlie described how individual lecturers varied in their teaching styles, with some treating the group like HE students and others treating them like FE students. Although pedagogical approaches will of course vary at any institution, this lack of clarity and consistency can be particularly confusing for HE in FE students, who are not only trying to adjust to HE but also doing so in an institution where staff are one of their primary sources of support.

After hearing similar comments from multiple students at Bennett College, I took the opportunity to sit in the open plan office where all of the

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tutors for business courses across the college were based. This period of observation provided a unique insight into what it would be like from the tutor's perspective to teach there. During the hour in which I sat in this office, it was almost impossible to focus on anything but the constant stream of students wandering in with various requests, accompanied by another stream of tutors drifting in and out on their way to and from teaching. Although some tutors specialised in HE or FE courses, many were juggling both. Due to the substantial teaching responsibilities of most HE in FE tutors, this situation means many are often not only constantly shifting between teaching HE and teaching FE but also, in many cases, attempting to support students at a variety of different levels.

HE in FE staff clearly face a number of difficulties in trying to develop themselves as academics or researchers within such an environment; an issue which is covered extensively in the literature about HE in FE (e.g. Feather, 2010, 2012). However, Parry et al. (2012: 11) reported that '[c]ontracts for staff in FECs [do] not require them to undertake research, although they [are] increasingly expected to undertake scholarly activity'. Despite this expectation, many HE in FE staff lack support from college leadership in their attempts to engage academically with their field (Feather, 2012).

While I experienced this situation first-hand at Bennett College, it was not unique to this institution. Indeed, at every college I visited, I got the impression that it was nearly impossible for any HE in FE tutor to have five consecutive minutes without interruption. They seemed to be run off their feet attending to students' requests from the moment they walked in until when they left for the day, and sometimes beyond that. For example, one course

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leader mentioned to me that students sometimes asked if it would be possible to meet on a Saturday or Sunday morning for additional tuition.

Constantly providing the support students so clearly value can be a significant burden for college tutors. However, because of the pressure on HE in FE tutors from their institutions to ensure both high attendance and completion rates, they are generally required to keep closer track of their students than university lecturers. Although this requirement could explain some of the added support felt by students, it also makes it more difficult for HE in FE tutors to establish an appropriate boundary between their time and their students' needs. This issue is even more complicated when a particular tutor teaches students for both FE *and* HE qualifications because students then associate that individual with a certain level of support.

Regardless, it is important not to discount the skilfulness of HE in FE tutors in developing and maintaining relationships with their students. As described by one of the experts interviewed at the beginning of this research,

one of the things that is a hidden skill, which isn't valorised in pay scales at all for the HE in FE lecturer, is having the right kind of sympathetic and empathetic understanding of their students as well. I think that's a key facet of their skill set...[t]he type and kind of student you've got is much more plastic, much more fluid, in HE in FE than it is in HE. So, again that becomes a very important part of the skill set of the HE in FE lecturer (Expert 3, 2012).

Given the links between FE colleges and their communities, local business, schools and other institutions, it makes sense that their college staff would need to be proficient in building relationships with others. Nevertheless, considering the challenges many HE in FE students face on a daily basis to attend HE, there is no question that feeling supported by staff is extremely important. Therefore, there is a clear struggle for HE in FE tutors between

providing their HE students with the support they need in order to be successful while also encouraging them to develop the independence necessitated at the bachelor's level.

7.3.1.1.2 The university student perspective on relationships with staff

Compared with college students, university students reported much more distant relationships with institutional staff. Rather than seeing themselves as different members of the same team, some university students described how, particularly during their first year, they saw themselves and their lecturers as being in opposition:

I wouldn't say there really was a relationship [with the lecturers] in the first year. I think we kind of thought as students it was very much us and them and we didn't like them and we didn't want to sort of be on the same team as them.

Rosie, 24-year-old female university student

As Rosie went on to explain, part of the problem in developing relationships with lecturers was the lack of one-to-one interaction with them during the start of university courses. This limited interaction was partially due to the fact that students frequently attended first-year lectures with hundreds of other students, but also because sometimes students only had a particular lecturer for one module and then never saw them again. In Rosie's case, the lecturer she grew closest to was the one who served as her personal supervisor during her work placement.

According to Matthew, a 22-year-old male who attended the same university as Rosie, a student's supervisor is responsible for supporting a student before, during and after their work placement by visiting them at the location of their placement, providing feedback on the assignments they do and

helping them adjust back to university when they return. The supervisor invests a significant amount of time in their supervisees relative to other students and is seemingly held at least partially accountable for a student's success on their placement. This personal interaction, responsibility and accountability mirrors the support HE in FE tutors tend to provide their students, which might explain why some of the university students described their relationships with supervisors as being more supportive than their relationships with other lecturers.

In a similar vein, students at both universities in the study explained how much easier they found it to build relationships with lecturers in tutorials as opposed to lectures. In fact, when I asked Harry if there is anything he would change about his experience on the course, he said:

The only thing I would change would be I'd probably make it a bit more personal. I think sometimes it comes across like it's a little bit too big for me to learn properly.

Harry, 20-year-old male university student

Since Harry did not have a strong relationship with his personal supervisor, the lectures and seminars he attended served as his primary method for building relationships with staff. However, in these situations he often found it difficult to obtain the support he needed in his learning due to the number of other students present. Therefore, his story demonstrates how unique the personal learning environment experienced by college students is compared to the experience of many university students.

7.3.1.2 Relationships with other students

From the student perspective, one of the most noticeable differences of going to a college rather than a university is the limited social life offered at

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colleges. One particularly important aspect of this difference is the fact that most HE in FE students do not live in residence halls during their course. In this study, none of the HE in FE students lived in residence halls. Conversely, for university students both in this study and more generally, living in residence halls serves as a primary form of building relationships with other students. The significance of residence halls as a key source for building friendships at university is especially striking when considering the multiple avenues through which university students could potentially meet others.

Indeed, Parry et al. (2012: 19) found that some younger students pursuing their bachelor's degree at a college believed 'they would have a much better social life if they [had] gone to university and lived in halls of residence', primarily because some colleges have 'no social life and no facilities for meeting outside the classroom'. However, students pursuing other HE in FE qualifications or who were not of traditional university age did not raise this issue. Findings such as this one reinforce the fact that younger and mature students have some different needs when it comes to HE in FE and also indicate that there is a potential shift in expectations that comes with younger students moving to the bachelor's level. This sentiment was certainly expressed by some younger students in this study. For example, as we discussed the relationships Max had with his tutors and fellow students, he said:

the only thing I feel sad about this course is that I haven't had the experience of...being in a house with people and I'd have loved to have done that.

Max, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

Despite the fact that, throughout his interview, Max had many negative things to say about university life and even believed he would have dropped out had

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he gone to university over college, he still has a twinge of regret about having missed out on living with other students. In fact, Max mentioned that he might go back to university one day simply to experience this aspect of it.

When considering the data from this study about the living situation of university students, it is clear why younger HE in FE students might feel that part of the 'bachelor's student experience' is living with other students. Notably, all of the university student interviewees in this study were still living with at least one person they had met through being in the same residence hall in their first year. This finding is also validated by data gathered in the questionnaire. Whereas 46 per cent (21 out of 44) of college students were living with their parents during their course and 33 per cent (15 out of 44) were living with their partner/spouse and/or children, only 9 per cent (3 out of 34) of university students were living with their parents and 0 per cent were living with their partner/spouse and/or children. Instead, the large majority of university students (91 per cent) were living with friends/students in rented accommodation or in residence halls.

Although university students might make friends through meeting people on their course, it is usually more likely that their close friends will be those with whom they share accommodation. Rosie describes this situation from the university student's perspective:

I think I was quite lucky in first year. I'd gone into halls of residence, and two of the people actually that I was living with are business students, so we kind of formed most of our relationship at home and we're kind of lucky that we have each other for sort of talking about classes and things like that...there's no one else from classes alone that I would consider to be kind of someone I'm going to be friends with for life. I think that's kind of been formed more from living arrangements.

Rosie, 24-year-old female university student

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As Rosie explains, she regarded it as 'lucky' rather than typical that she ended up living with students in her first year who shared her subject area. Although she also met other business students during classes, she assumed none of these would necessarily become long-term friends. It was living together rather than taking the same course that created a bond between her and her friends.

In comparison, Charlie explained how isolating university can be for students who do not live in halls during their first year:

I was in a bit of a weird situation because usually you know you'd live at the university, you'd have your halls and you'd make your friends through that. I never really made any friends because I was going in and coming home every night...[At college,] we all live at home...whereas at university...there was...all the groups of people that lived together and then there was the guys like me who were on the outside [and] found it difficult to make friends.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

Charlie, who attended HE full-time alongside working part-time, lived in his own flat during the year he spent at a local university. As he explains, he found it difficult to make friends because he was not on campus all the time; he came in for lectures and then went home again. However, the friend groups around him tended to be formed through people who were living together, and it was difficult for 'guys like [him] who were on the outside' of these groups to build relationships with other students. After he started attending college, he found it much easier to make friends because everyone else in his cohort was in a similar situation; no one in his college cohort lived together, and most of them had other responsibilities outside of the course. Hence, their similar life circumstances helped them connect when it came to building relationships with each other.

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Although mutual external circumstances can be a contributing factor to HE in FE students building relationships, another important influence is the size of their cohorts. Just as small cohort sizes foster supportive relationships between students and staff, the limited number of students in top-up year groups also helps them develop close relationships with each other. Furthermore, because many of these students do not consider themselves to be 'academic' people, this shared identity helps them serve as a significant source of support for each other when it comes to developing their self-confidence. For example, when I asked Fleur what it was about her top-up year experience that had given her confidence, she immediately pointed to the influence of her course mates:

The team—we are a team together...we help each other in some way, we help a lot each other (sic)...[w]hich is different to uni, I would think.

Fleur, 23-year-old female HE in FE student

As Fleur describes, HE in FE students tend to see each other as collaborators rather than competitors, and they are keen to help each other be successful.

Louise also described a sense of being on the same team as her course mates:

I struggled in the foundation degree, but I'm not struggling in [the top-up year] and I think that's because [of] my colleagues helping me...I wasn't gonna do the top-up; I had no intention of doing the top-up, but I just felt well why not really, you know you've come this far, why not go an extra year and just get the BA honours.

Louise, 49-year-old female HE in FE student

Like Fleur and Louise express, generally no one other than an HE in FE student's course mates truly understands the challenges they are facing. The experience of juggling an HE course alongside work life and home life can be isolating without the support of people who appreciate the difficulties involved.

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This particular type of support can be incredibly powerful, which is evidenced most clearly through examples like that of Abigail at Gardiner College:

[On] the course that we've been on, the foundation degree course, the people were absolutely what kept me on it. I found it very difficult, but we all sort of pulled together and became great friends. And so when the honours came up, I wasn't interested and I think I was actually the last one to sign onto the course because I didn't want to carry on with education because of time. However, I didn't want to lose the friendships and the camaraderie that had been built up over the previous two years and so I wanted to carry on meeting with everybody on a Thursday.

Abigail, 39-year-old female HE in FE student

As Abigail explains, her entire motivation for doing the top-up year was down to her relationships with her course mates. As both a mother and a CEO of her own business, Abigail already led an extremely busy life without adding in the commitment of continuing to attend HE. However, because the course cultivated such closeness between her and the rest of her cohort, pursuing the top-up year became an option worth considering. Stories like this one, in which relationships encourage progression, demonstrate that the importance of creating an environment in which HE in FE students can and do support each other cannot be over-estimated.

7.3.1.3 Relationships with family

Exploring students' relationships with family reveals another important difference between HE in FE students compared with their university counterparts in terms of their exposure to HE prior to entry. Data gathered through the questionnaire for this study revealed that while nearly 100 per cent of university students had at least one parent who had attended HE, this only applied to 37 per cent of HE in FE students. Although HE in FE students were slightly more likely to have had a sibling go to HE (44 per cent) than a

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parent, university students were much more likely to have had a sibling go to HE (74 per cent). Therefore, HE in FE students in general are less likely than university students to have been exposed to HE¹²⁸ by a family member before going to HE themselves. Despite this fact, the *majority* of HE in FE students in this study (61 per cent) were exposed to HE prior to entry, be that through an immediate family member, extended family member or friend. This general trend aligns with Parry et al.'s (2012: 181) finding that

the parents of HE in FE students are less likely to have had experience of HE, although this is not necessarily true of other family members (and may partly be explained by generational shifts in the scale and penetration of HE).

However, the fact that college students often have fewer people in their immediate support networks with HE experience means their exposure to it will likely have been limited.

This limited experience of higher education means that receiving support from staff members and other students is crucial to the success of HE in FE students. Equally important, though, is the support these students receive at home. Investing in HE can require an adjustment for the entire family, particularly for students with spouses and/or children. The extent to which the family supports and adapts to the needs of the HE student can significantly influence the student's progression. This dichotomy is best exemplified through the examples of Scarlett and Isaac, both of whom have spouses and at least one child at home in addition to jobs outside of their course. In Scarlett's case, her husband was not only one of the reasons she started her course but also one of the reasons she was able to continue with it:

¹²⁸ 'A student is defined as exposed to HE if at least one of their brother or sister, son or daughter, partner or spouse, another member of household or immediate family has completed or is studying for a HE qualification' (Parry et al., 2012: 202).

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One of the other factors for coming on the course was my husband got made redundant from his big engineering job and the plan was that he would always look after us—we'd have a child, and he would be the [breadwinner] and I would be the mummy at home. And when he got made redundant that just all went pfff and so I was like right what do we do now?...[And] because of that he looks after the house and looks after [our daughter]...I'm the breadwinner. I research and he does the housework and dinner.

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

Scarlett's initial decision to pursue HE began as a creative solution to the problem of her husband being made redundant. Because of his support, what began as a temporary situation became more permanent, as Scarlett not only completed her bachelor's course but also went on to pursue a master's immediately afterwards. Switching roles at home in order to accommodate Scarlett's decision to go to HE eventually provided the possibility for her to continue with it.

Conversely, although Isaac (43-year-old male HE in FE student) seemed on the fence about whether to continue with HE, he said 'If you ask my wife, she says I'm finishing this year'. Despite the fact that many of his course mates tried to encourage him to keep going, doing so without his wife's support would be practically impossible given his other commitments. Although he might have made this comment in part as a joke, it illustrates, particularly in comparison with Scarlett's situation, the influence a spouse's support can have during a student's HE experience.

7.3.2 Support services

In addition to receiving support from staff, other students and family during their courses, college students also have access to a range of support services at their college. These services often include, but are not limited to,

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those related to fees and funding, welfare and careers advice. While the majority of students interviewed reported rarely or never using the fees and funding or welfare services at the college, many of them reported not feeling they had access to the careers advice they needed as bachelor's degree students. In most cases, students explained that while a careers service was available, they found it was often not accustomed to or, in some cases, adequately prepared to assist HE students. For example, Chloe, who was applying for a master's course during her top-up year, felt that

because [the college] only goes up to undergraduate level...they can only...offer directional signposting towards, towards postgraduate [courses].

Chloe, 24-year-old female HE in FE student

In other words, the careers service staff could help HE in FE students with where to go for further information for postgraduate courses, but it was difficult for them to offer actual advice. Charlie, who attended the same institution as Chloe, also found the careers advice lacking:

That's one area I feel that the college could do with like an improvement...as far as I can tell, the college doesn't seem to offer a massive amount of careers advice and things like that. So that's something that, that I feel it could be worked on.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

Charlie explained that rather than relying on the careers advice that was available, he often went to his tutors instead. While this decision makes sense as far as ensuring the student received the advice he needed, it visibly adds to the already heavy burden on HE in FE staff.

7.3.3 Careers advice at colleges and universities

Since the careers advice and guidance students receive can potentially influence their expectations and eventual outcomes, it is an important service

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to consider when investigating these areas. In part because careers service staff at many colleges are more accustomed to advising FE rather than HE students, college bachelor's students do not perceive them to be as well equipped to help those finishing HE courses. As Charlie explained,

[the college] don't see [that]...for some of us, this is the end of our education; this is the end of the line. Whereas an FE student would come [to] do the FE course and then they'd move on to possibly an HE course...[I'll] be moving on to something else, but I don't think that the [staff] feel that. They think that it's 'Oh, this guy's coming back to do another course next year because he's moving up further up'...there could be a bit more focus on that.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

While Charlie acknowledges that the service available might be useful for FE students planning to pursue additional courses, he felt both the careers service staff and tutors overlooked the fact that this was not the case for HE students, particularly at the bachelor's level.

Although this type of service is supplemented in many colleges by personal/professional development modules, guest speakers and ad hoc one-to-one support from tutors, students at colleges still reported not receiving the amount of careers support they wanted or expected, particularly when seeking and applying for jobs or further study during their final year. In fact, Gardiner College was the only FE institution where this issue did not emerge, which is likely due to the fact that every interviewee there already worked full-time and had a fairly clear sense of why they were doing the bachelor's degree. This finding supports Parry et al.'s (2012: 151) point that older students (in this case, aged 25 and over) 'had much clearer plans' for their future than younger students. Parry et al. (2012: 151) also found that part-time students 'had greater clarity' about their career plans than full-time students, which fits with

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the Gardiner College case as well. Although students there attended 'full-time', they were only required to be in college one day per week, which is how they managed to work full-time alongside their course.

At the other three colleges in this study, both mature and younger students described the lack of careers help available:

[W]e haven't really had anyone come round and talk to us about careers...one of the lecturers did go through [and] looked at our CVs for us, but I do think for some people that did maybe want to apply to graduate programmes, it would've been good for them if maybe we could have had a session or something based on you know applications and things like that, but we haven't really had that at all.

Caroline, mature female HE in FE student

I feel like we could maybe do with a bit more careers advice...because I want to work in [a particular industry]...and I feel like I'm a little bit stuck on how to get there...I'd like someone to like sit me down and help me formulate a plan.

Lily, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

I do feel that at the end or nearing the end last year, there was nothing in place at all for anybody to help them decide. Nobody knew what they were doing...even if they'd put a lecture by one week to say like we'll have some careers space...these are your options, these are what you can do, but because there was nothing, we all ended up sort of floundering at the end, and I think that was their biggest downfall really, their biggest problem—they didn't have that structure in place which would have been very helpful for a lot of us. I know some of my friends haven't got any jobs [and are] still working in the jobs they were in...and that [support] could've been a bit more in place I think.

Scarlett, 41-year-old female HE in FE graduate¹²⁹

I feel that I could maybe do with a bit more [careers] support because obviously with everybody's different situations, and because I've been in the business for such a long time and I've now sort of stepped out, I feel as though I'm meant to start from scratch.

Leo, 37-year-old male HE in FE student

Whereas some students, like Francesca, expressed the need for fairly specific advice, such as that related to postgraduate applications, others, like Lily and

¹²⁹ This quote is taken from a post-graduation interview, which is why Scarlett is referred to here as a graduate rather than a student.

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Scarlett, described the lack of more general careers advice and guidance. Leo adds an additional dimension from the mature student's perspective by explaining that even with previous experience, he still feels in need of support to help him 'start from scratch' in a new area. Indeed, most college students, regardless of age or experience, expressed a need for more careers advice both during and immediately following their bachelor's degrees.

Although any recent graduate inevitably confronts new experiences and knowledge gaps when applying for jobs, these college students' experiences stand in sharp contrast to those described by university students when it comes to careers advice. Rosie and Matthew, both of whom attended Bingley University, described having two separate services—one general and one subject-specific—available while they were students:

Well, the university has kind of a generic one...the University Careers Service, but...I've never felt the need to make use of them because we have so much in-house in the business department that I've not really ventured out of it, I suppose...it really is up to the students to actively take part; nobody will make you take part.

Rosie, 24-year-old female university student

We have what's called the [careers] office and they're available five days a week to sort of go through what you want to do, what you're looking to do and maybe relevant areas for you to look at. There's also the...[other careers service]...based in the Union, which is basically looking to do the same sort of thing but they're doing it on a more general scale, not focused on just business-related degrees, but they can give you, you know help with CVs and covering letters and general tips.

Matthew, 22-year-old male university student

Like Rosie and Matthew, Archie (21-year-old male student from Darcy University) also had access to a careers service offering extensive opportunities for both training and advice, which was supplemented by one-to-one careers-related advice given to him by his personal tutor. Regardless of how close college students may be to their tutors or how supportive the learning

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environment of a college can be, it would be difficult for any colleges without a substantial number of HE students to offer the extensive services described by these university students. As with other aspects of HE in FE courses, college tutors do not have the ability to completely outsource careers advice in the same way university lecturers can. In addition, it can be difficult for tutors to prioritise careers advice and guidance over reaching targets, on which they are assessed, in other areas like completion rates.

Furthermore, the presence of services does not necessarily lead to students using them. Edward, for instance, admitted to only attending compulsory careers events offered by his university, rather than accessing the full range of services available:

I've sort of done [the careers research] myself...[I] haven't really used [the careers service for much, just sort of compulsory interview days or if you had to go in for a workshop or something like that. I haven't really had that much contact with them.

Edward, 22-year old male university student

Though he may not claim to have explicitly used the full range of services on offer, Edward arguably still benefited from being in an institutional culture where such practices were a norm. One example is the fact that Edward took the opportunity to complete a work placement as part of his course. Although he did have to apply for the placement, he learned of the opportunity through the careers service:

[W]e had to arrange it ourselves, but there was support from the university. They sort of highlighted who, the companies that do placement years and that sort of thing, but we had to go off and sort of find it ourselves, but it was built into the programme.

Edward, 22-year old male university student

Hence, even those students who do not necessarily actively engage with their university's careers service have an advantage with it being there, particularly when it comes to organising work placements.

Like Edward, Rosie, Matthew and Archie (all university students) also completed work placements and, in each case, they learned of the opportunities through communication channels available to them via their university's careers service. Only one university student, Harry, did not complete a work placement during his course, which was due to unsuccessful applications rather than not wanting to do one.

7.3.4 Access to resources

There are also striking differences between colleges and universities with regard to students' access to resources, such as designated study spaces, library books and computers. Since HE students typically represent a small minority of the entire student body at colleges, not all colleges have separate resources available for HE students. Therefore, HE students often must share things like study spaces and computers with FE students. As Charlie explained,

With computers, you ask any number of people on our course and the first thing they'll tell you about the computing is that we try and avoid that anyway because it's you know it's...all the FE students...you can't get any work done in our libraries I think.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

In addition to being outnumbered, as Charlie describes, HE students are also restricted on time, and therefore must be able to focus on their work when it is time to complete it. This circumstance makes the lack of study space even more frustrating for students. Hence, the problem is not so much with whether

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computers are available but with the lack of separation between student groups with different priorities.

Even when HE students are given designated study spaces or computers, there is a risk of these resources being taken away. Many students at Collins College reported that during their foundation degree, they were given access to a room with computers that was only open to HE students. However, when their provision moved to a new building, it took their tutors some months to negotiate with the college and secure a similar room. While the situation was resolved in time for students to work on their dissertations, students spent the majority of their top-up year without access to this space. The impact of this aligns with Burns' (2007) findings related to how changing physical boundaries creates an ordering effect. As Burns (ibid., p. 9) explains, '[t]his tends to have an affect (sic) of undermining, in [students'] view, this particular college as a 'proper' setting for HE',

Accessing the books needed for their course can also be complicated for top-up year students. Although they often need different books from FE students and therefore do not always have to share as they do with study spaces and computers, some college libraries have a very limited HE section. Scarlett explained how she managed to work around this problem:

Books are difficult, but I'm very good at finding my research elsewhere so I don't tend to rely on the college's library, so because of that you know it hasn't really affected me, but that doesn't mean it hasn't some people because I know some people get very just 'book's not there' and I just, I just find mine elsewhere.

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

In the instances when Scarlett could not find the resources needed online, she resorted to buying the books she needed in order to complete her coursework.

Theoretically, this situation should not be a problem because HE in FE students are given access to the library at their partner university. However, due to time and/or location limitations, students are unlikely to visit their partner university in person. For example, Phoebe (20-year-old female HE in FE student) described how even though their student union representative secured library access for their cohort at two local libraries, she 'never got round to using that [option]'. Consequently, as Scarlett described, they can end up relying heavily on online resources available either via online version of the partner university's library or through using Google.

7.4 Conclusions about students' HE experiences

Students' HE experiences are largely shaped by their institution's environment; an area in which colleges and universities are noticeably different. Section 7.1.1 described some of the distinctive features of these two types of institution from an outsider's perspective, such as their physical layout and the extent to which visitors are vetted (or not) before being allowed to interact with students. In general, the college environment is more akin to that of a school than of a university, which has clear implications for its HE provision.

One of the most striking differences between these institutional environments was the relative presence of HE in each. In the universities, HE was all encompassing, and there was therefore no need to define where it took place within the institution; HE was a way of being or doing rather than being associated with a physical place. In contrast, in the colleges, HE occupied a particular physical location (e.g. a corridor or set of rooms) used by a specific group of students. Since the majority of colleges offering HE only have 100-500

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HE students (Parry et al., 2012: 66), these students are typically in the minority at their institution, as was the case for students in this study. Partially because of this positioning, these students were exposed to a tension between HE and FE that did not exist as explicitly for the university students. While this tension was not solely due to small student numbers, there is evidence to suggest that the presence or lack of a 'critical mass of HE students' can affect the student experience of college-based HE students (Parry et al., 2012: 189).

Colleges, like their students, are constrained in what they can offer relative to universities; therefore, they are not always equipped to meet the expectations students may have by nature of being on an HE course (an issue that 7.1.2 explored in more depth). Without a substantial HE presence, providing benefits such as designated HE study spaces, let alone instilling an HE culture or ethos in the college, is not always feasible. Within institutions where facilities and services were geared more towards FE rather than HE students, the college-based HE students in this study were in environments largely intended for a different type of learner; a frustrating challenge that their university counterparts did not face. This issue also filtered down to the course level, evidenced through the limited amount of specialised bachelor's provision that colleges could offer. In other words, the courses at colleges covered more general content than at universities, where students could focus their degree on a specific aspect of business after completing introductory modules. With such small numbers of HE students, these colleges simply did not have sufficient numbers of staff with the experience required to offer this more specialist training.

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Some of the challenges colleges can face in offering HE are meant to be resolved through their partnerships with universities. For example, college students are normally allowed to check out books and other resources from their partner university's library. However, there is a complex relationship between many college students and 'their' university (meaning the university that validates their degree). During their course, students in this study clearly felt removed from their partner university, and they did not consistently benefit from the university's involvement in their experience. In some cases, students were highly critical of the resources and support provided by their college's partner institution. In other cases, students were simply apathetic about the university's connection to the course. Regardless of how they felt about the university and its relationship with the college, most students did not use the on-course benefits available to them as a result of the partnership, such as in-person library access (though some students did use online library access) or becoming members of the partner university's students' union. This dynamic did not feature whatsoever in the university student experience. Since university students attended the institutions that awarded their degrees, there were no partner institutions that could impinge, be it negatively or positively, on their experience in the same way that partner universities could for college students.

Despite these differences, there were also some distinct benefits for bachelor's students from being at colleges, such as being required to be on campus for fewer days per week than university students. This arrangement enabled students with external commitments to attend the course alongside work or family responsibilities. There are students in this research, for instance,

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who could both work full-time *and* study full-time because their institution only required one full day of attendance per week. Additionally, assessment at some colleges was based on essays, which many college students reported to prefer, rather than examinations, whereas assessment by examination was an integral part of the university student experience.

Other aspects of being a college student had both positive and negative attributes. Although students at colleges tended to report closer relationships with college staff than university students did with university staff, there is evidence that this situation can lead to college students feeling overly dependent on staff for support (Parry et al., 2012: 122). While small class sizes also meant that college students could build close relationships with other students in their cohort, they did not have the same opportunities as university students to meet other peers, such as through living in residence halls or joining campus-based clubs and societies. Therefore, college students relied on a very small network of people for both social and academic support during their HE experience. Since most of them lived with family members during their course, college students were also more likely than university students to be influenced by their family's relative support or lack thereof during their pursuit of HE.

There are strong parallels between this study's findings about students' experiences and those of previous research about HE in FE students (Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004; Parry et al., 2012; King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2013; Rapley, 2014). College students pursuing a range of HE qualifications (including bachelor's degrees) have elsewhere expressed frustration with the challenges of being HE students in an FE environment (Burns, 2007; King,

Saraswat and Widdowson, 2013; Rapley, 2014). Such discussions (which are well documented in the literature discussed in section 3.2.2), consider both the benefits and, importantly, the consequences of the small class sizes, supportive relationships, university partnerships, a condensed timetable and other aspects of the HE in FE student experience.

When looking across the literature, though, it is important to recognise that bachelor's students (who are at level 6) deal with many of the same issues reported by students at levels 4 and 5 (Burns, 2007; Rapley, 2014). Therefore, the problems students encounter during initial HE qualifications are not necessarily resolved when they switch to level 6, regardless of whether they switch to a university or stay at the same institution. In fact, any problems present when students pursue levels 4 and 5 may become more acute and complex as they move into level 6, where more is expected of them and they expect more of their experience. One such example is feedback on assignments. While foundation degree students, for instance, may appreciate in-depth, constructive feedback on assignments, it is essential for bachelor's degree students, whose marks on assignments form part of their eventual degree classification.¹³⁰

Though students' expectations may increase as they move into higher qualifications, it is clear that even college students at levels 4 and 5 often compare themselves and their experiences with their university counterparts. In some cases, the frustration they feel as college-based HE students is rooted not only in their own experience but also in what they perceive the university

¹³⁰ Though not covered in detail in the reported findings, this issue did arise in some student interviews conducted for this study.

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student experience to be like. One level 5 student in Rapley's (2014: 202) study, for example described their experience as 'something of a "bargain basement deal"' compared to what university students receive. Hence, the challenges experienced by some (though not all) HE in FE students are as much about what university students may or may not get as they are about what college students do or do not get. For example, college students report mixed experiences when it comes to support services and access to resources at their institutions; however, they consistently tend to find that what they are offered is not equivalent to what they might have at a university. One of the most notable differences is between the support services, and especially careers services, offered at each. As Parry, Davies and Williams (2004: 18) found in their research (mentioned in 3.2.2.2), 'external sources of advice and guidance [are] available [within colleges], but most college teachers regarded individual student support as part of their everyday role'. This approach clearly contrasts with the 'specialised, centralised and professionalised model of support' provided at universities (ibid.). These findings are supported by the experiences of students in this study, who described clear differences between colleges and universities in terms of careers advice provision (discussed in 7.3.3).

In general, the biggest difference between the two is simply that HE in FE is its own type of HE; the data collected for this study indicates that HE in FE is not like HE at a university. This distinction is largely due to the fact that colleges and universities are governed by completely different figured worlds (terminology from Holland et al., 1998, introduced in 4.2): whereas universities are organised according to the agents, acts and forces that have relevance for

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the world of HE, colleges are organised by those that have relevance for the world of FE. Rather than having its own figured world, HE in FE is more like 'a hybrid: in some ways more akin to further education and in other respects more like higher education' (Parry, Davies and Thompson, 2003: 24). Importantly, due to its heterogeneity (a characteristic of HE in FE that was explored in 3.1), the nature of its hybridity varies from one provider to another. This situation makes it extremely challenging for there to be a common understanding as to what HE in FE is, and to manage students' expectations of what it should be like.

8 FINDINGS III: STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Building on the exploration of bachelor's students' HE experiences, this chapter examines their post-graduation expectations and outcomes. In addition to using data from the first round of interviews and questionnaire, both of which took place during students' final year, the findings for this chapter also emerged from the 12 post-graduation interviews conducted from six months up to a year after students graduated.¹³¹ Additional post-graduation data were collected through email correspondence with three students who were willing to share their experiences but were not interviewed.¹³² Therefore, in total, post-graduation data was collected from 15 students, or half of the original eligible sample.¹³³ This round of data collection focused on exploring their post-graduation transitions, the process of applying for jobs or further study, their activities (employment-related or otherwise) since graduation, their long-term career and salary aspirations and their reflections on the usefulness of their degree course.

This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part focuses on exploring students' post-graduation employment and salary expectations, while the second part examines students' employment, further study and salary

¹³¹ To distinguish between students' quotes from before and after graduation, different descriptors are used underneath each type. Final year interview quotes label the interviewee as a 'student' and post-graduation quotes label the interviewee as a 'graduate'. Where a quote comes from an interview with a graduate, I have added one year to the student's age given at the time of their first interview (during their final year), as most post-graduation interviews took place approximately one year after pre-graduation interviews.

¹³² Two of these students provided general information about their outcomes and were willing to be interviewed but stopped responding to attempts to contact them. The third answered questions via email. Another student had not yet completed his degree due to studying part-time and could therefore not yet discuss his outcomes. Finally, a fifth student was willing to participate but also stopped responding to attempts to contact her and did not provide any information about her post-graduation experiences.

¹³³ The consequences of knowing the outcomes for only half the sample are discussed further in section 8.3.1.

outcomes. The second half also compares students' outcomes with their expectations, and discusses some of the personal outcomes students experienced as a result of completing their degree.

8.1 Researching students' expectations and outcomes

Managing students' expectations about their future is essential to enhancing their experiences, largely because their eventual outcomes can influence how they reflect on their course after completion. For example, a student with high employment expectations who does not end up with the job or salary that they expect might reflect more negatively on their student experience than a student whose expectations are met or exceeded. As a result, being aware of the alignment between students' expectations and outcomes is vital for institutions that require satisfied students and successful graduates to secure future HE funding.

Yet, as previously mentioned in 7.3.3, there are significant differences between colleges and universities in terms of how students are prepared for their post-graduation future. Partly because of these evidenced discrepancies, it is clear that institutions can play a substantial role in both shaping and managing students' post-graduation expectations. Indeed, Goodlad and Thompson (2007: 3) point out that '[m]ost advertised courses offer suggestions for possible careers or employment routes', which students are exposed to even before they decide to apply for HE. In addition to potentially moulding students' expectations, an institution's services, reputation and partnerships can affect, at least to some extent, what their students end up doing after graduation.

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However, exploring students' expectations and outcomes at colleges and universities for this study was particularly challenging for three reasons. First, because of the heterogeneity of the college student sample, there was very little consistency among interviewees in terms of the opportunities available to them. Both their post-graduation expectations and outcomes differed substantially depending upon factors such as whether they were already in employment or owned their own business while on their degree course. Second, most of the university students in the sample knew during their final year interview what they would be doing after graduation, making it practically impossible to compare their short-term expectations with those of college students. Nevertheless, it remained feasible to discuss, and therefore compare, their outcomes and some aspects of their longer-term expectations. Whereas discussions of short-term expectations focused on the period up to one year after graduation, those about longer-term expectations focused on what students might be doing and earning up to five years later. Finally, due to the gap between when students graduated and when they were interviewed, the data collected about their post-graduation transitions relied upon their memories. As such, it is possible that they misremembered or forgot (see footnote 156 on page 274 for an example) certain aspects of their experiences. While it is important to be aware of this issue, it is equally important to recognise that (as argued in section 6.1) there is valuable knowledge to be gained in exploring why people tell stories in particular ways, even if they did not happen exactly as reported (Luker, 2010: 167 discusses the reality of facing this challenge when using interviews as a research method).

8.2 Students' post-graduation expectations

8.2.1 Short-term employment expectations

Looking at the questionnaire data alone, it appears that while university and college students differ in some areas of their post-graduation expectations, they are perhaps more similar than might be expected. In addition, due to the average age of questionnaire participants from each type of institution (21 years old for university respondents and 28 years old for college respondents), it is possible that any differences between institutions are related to age rather than strictly related to type of institution.

Following graduation, at least half of the students from both types of institution (18 students, or 58 per cent, from universities and 22 students, or 50 per cent, from colleges) expected to obtain employment related to longer-term career plans. Another group, who planned to travel or take time out, included the same number of university and college students (four from each). Those who planned to enrol on a postgraduate degree course included five university students and four college students. The four least popular responses were becoming self-employed (one college student and no university students), not knowing what they planned to do (one college student and no university students), obtaining temporary employment while considering longer-term plans (two university students and no college students), and obtaining temporary employment while paying off debt, which no students from either institution chose. Another relatively unpopular answer, but interesting finding, was that two students from universities planned to undertake vocational training, whereas only one college student selected this answer. Although this

answer accounts for a very small proportion of students, it is noteworthy to consider that these university students chose this option over any other.¹³⁴

The one category in which these two groups seemed particularly dissimilar came from those who answered 'other'¹³⁵ when asked what they planned to do after graduation, which included nine college students and no university students. Given that many college students are older and/or in at least part-time employment while on their course, it is not necessarily surprising for this response to be popular. Most often, the answer given in this category was linked to a student's current employment, with over half of students who selected this claiming they planned to stay or progress in their jobs or continue to work in businesses they own. Other answers included more diverse responses, ranging from completing an unpaid work placement to developing a charity.

These findings from the questionnaire data can be compared with those from the Parry et al. (2012) and Futuretrack (University of Warwick, 2014b and 2014c) studies. Notable similarities include the fact that the majority of the students completing bachelor's degrees at FE colleges, who were surveyed by Parry et al. (2012: 154) during the 2011/12 academic year, expected to be employed after graduation.¹³⁶ Therefore, the post-graduation expectations of

¹³⁴ When asked 'What do you plan to do after you graduate?', both the online and in-person versions of the questionnaire instructed students to select one answer from nine options. The online version would not allow students to select more than one answer, and students who selected more than one answer for the in-person version were excluded from the analysis for this question. All nine options that were available are included in the summary of findings here.

¹³⁵ This group of students selected 'Other' as one of the nine options available when asked what they planned to do after graduation. Those who ticked 'Other' were asked to specify their plans using an open text field included below this option.

¹³⁶ This majority was divided across a number of different employment possibilities: 55 per cent planned to 'get a paid job' after their current course; 14 per cent planned to stay with their current employer, with 9 per cent of these planning to also stay in the same job and

the college student sample in this study align fairly closely with those of Parry et al.'s (2012) sample, with the primary difference being that this study's college sample includes a slightly higher proportion of students who planned to enrol on a postgraduate degree course or travel or take time out (though with such small real numbers, this difference is likely negligible). An additional difference between this sample and previous research is that the university student sample in this study was more inclined to plan to undertake employment. In the Futuretrack study, mature students¹³⁷ were the only group in which over 50 per cent planned to obtain 'employment related to their long-term career plans' (University of Warwick, 2014a: 3), which aligns exactly with the college student sample in this study. For younger Futuretrack students, who were more similar in age to the university students in this study, the highest percentages were planning to enrol on a taught postgraduate course (approximately 36 per cent) or take a gap year (approximately 28 per cent) (Purcell et al., 2009: 116).¹³⁸ However, this difference cannot be attributed entirely to age or type of institution, as it may be that business students are more inclined to seek employment than students from other subjects.¹³⁹

Unlike the questionnaire data, the interview data revealed more differentiated responses with regard to post-graduation expectations between

the other 5 per cent hoping to change jobs; 13 per cent planned to change both jobs and employers; 9 per cent planned to study full-time; and 9 per cent planned to travel or take time out.

¹³⁷ The mature students group included students who entered HE at age 21 or older.

¹³⁸ These students and the mature students referenced in the sentence before were in their first year of HE when they gave these responses.

¹³⁹ Indeed, a later Futuretrack report stated that 84 per cent of Business & Administrative Studies students were employed after graduation, compared with only 5 per cent who were pursuing further study (Purcell et al., 2012: 62). This distribution is noticeably different from a subject like Physical Sciences, for which 60 per cent were employed and 28 per cent were studying (ibid.). Both Business and Physical Sciences also had a 10 per cent unemployment rate (ibid.).

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these two student groups. Three out of the five university graduates in the study had received and accepted job offers during their final year, and therefore already knew what they would be doing after graduation. Similarly, the two university students who had not secured jobs had submitted numerous applications for specific roles:

[I've m]ainly [applied for] analyst roles within finance businesses. I've been focussing on you know generally sort of people who are finance specialists rather than going into like the finance or the risk department of say someone like [a company] who doesn't deal with finance on a daily basis, that's very much a support function. I want to go for something [where] that's their primary function.

Matthew, 22-year-old male university student

Like Matthew, Harry (20-year-old male university student) also applied for multiple operations management jobs and had a couple of interviews before completing his final year. Therefore, even those university students who did not have job offers were pursuing jobs in specific industries and expected they would find appropriate positions.

In contrast, although many college students could provide a potential industry or area of interest in which they hoped to work, few of them had a clear plan for how to get there, and some were attempting multiple routes at the same time:

I believe at this moment in time—it may change—that I want to go into some sort of finance area. I think an accountant, saying an accountant is a bit too specific...I've looked at jobs such as tax advisors and things like that...[j]ust that sort of area really. I know it sounds all a bit strange to not sort of give anything specific, but I just find it very interesting.

Poppy, 26-year-old female HE in FE student

I'm thinking of taking some internships or work experience within the marketing area, but that is something I'm planning to do in some future...I have applied for some universities to do [a] master's...if I didn't get any, an answer from any university, then I probably [would] get a job...one of those two.

Omar, 30-year-old male HE in FE student

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Although there were some exceptions, such as students who planned to continue with their full-time jobs or a few who had submitted applications for graduate schemes and potential jobs during their final year, most college students told stories very similar to Poppy and Omar. In fact, some students mentioned multiple paths they would like to pursue during the course of one interview. For instance, Anna (21-year-old female HE in FE student) listed banking or teaching business at the college as potential short-term options, although her longer-term ambition was to *'be married and settle down and own something of my own—have a business of my own. What in I don't know, but I'd like to one day own something of my own'*. The difference between these college students' stories and those of the university students leaves the impression that perhaps university students have slightly more career direction during their final year than college students might have. As such, the disparity between the two begins to expose the high level of uncertainty college students face when entering the labour market.

8.2.2 The insecurity of college students

In terms of exploring potential career options, many students graduating with bachelor's degrees after attending a college are in a challenging position. With the exception of students who will continue with full-time employment upon completion of their degree, both younger and mature students perceive a number of hurdles as they near the end of their final year. First, as discussed in the previous section, they must decide on a particular industry in which they might like to work. However, in most cases, this choice is based on very little first-hand information. For example, some students in this

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study described selecting a potential employment area after taking one module about it. In the process of completing a degree at college, though, the course material rarely goes beyond a generic level, meaning students seem to be (at least from an outsider's perspective) basing potential career decisions on what is essentially an introduction to a particular topic. In contrast, university students have often gone into extensive depth on a specific topic by the time they reach their final year. Though this path leads to some regret amongst those who later realise that they do not enjoy their topic or do not wish to work in that area, they do leave university with the ability to make different and more informed career decisions with a higher level of confidence based on this self-knowledge.

Second, and linked to the first, college students do not always have work experience in the area in which they are interested. This problem is particularly acute for mature students, who may have extensive career experience in a particular industry, which might not be considered applicable or valuable in a different area. While university students will not necessarily have extensive employment experience, they do often develop relevant experience through a work placement and/or develop highly specialised knowledge and skills as they progress through their course.

Finally, as introduced in section 7.3.3, college students often do not have access to formal careers advice and guidance equivalent to that provided at universities. Therefore, they may be struggling to research, apply for and make career-related decisions without the support they feel they need. This is not to say they are not supported, as many students told stories about certain tutors offering excellent advice, reviewing their CVs and arranging work experience

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for them. However, these accounts were highly individualised and seemed to rely heavily upon student initiative. In other words, those students who asked for extra help were more likely to receive it. It is entirely possible that some of the students who were most in need were too busy struggling with other aspects of the course, such as adjusting to the learning level expected of them as bachelor's degree students, to worry about asking for career planning help.

Combining these factors can lead to a deeply felt sense of insecurity amongst college students as they prepare to enter the labour market. In particular, as will be demonstrated in the rest of this section, college students seem to doubt whether their course has adequately prepared them for what will be expected when they enter work. Lucy expressed feelings along these lines when we discussed the generic nature of her course:

It's all quite general and it all obviously does apply [to business], but because it's so general, I think sometimes things are missed...[a]nd people expect us to know it as well, I find...I do sometimes feel, not let down, but that some things aren't covered in the course that do massively apply to the real world.

Lucy, 35-year-old female HE in FE student

In this particular instance, Lucy was talking about her perceived lack of knowledge about finance and VAT; both areas which she felt she should better understand as a result of undertaking a business course. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Lucy was also concerned about how she would find a job in a particular industry without any relevant experience.

This point chimes with some of the literature reviewed in 3.2.2.1, and especially with Parry et al. (2012: 11), who found that some students 'were worried that they had become too reliant on tutors and were nervous about leaving the college environment and entering employment'. While university

students, too, may feel apprehensive, their apprehension appears to be more linked to finding the *best* post-graduation option, rather than simply *any* post-graduation option. This point of comparison might partially explain why graduate schemes seemed such a popular option amongst college students.

8.2.3 Graduate schemes and work placements

Over one-third of college student interviewees mentioned graduate schemes during their final year interviews as a viable post-graduation option, and many of them envisioned such schemes as one of the better options available. The popularity of this response was intriguing, particularly because both young and mature students mentioned it. When discussing his post-graduation ideas, Leo said:

I've got a few ideas [for what to do when I finish]—either set up my own business or go into marketing...because I have so much retail experience it would help in marketing—or join a graduate scheme...I've applied for [one] before and then [could apply to] other graduate schemes maybe...but I'm not sure how my age would go in these graduate schemes, I don't know.

Leo, 37-year-old male HE in FE student

Applying to a graduate scheme was only one of a few post-graduation options that Leo was considering. In his case, it was particularly interesting that graduate schemes were on par with other ideas, like setting up his own business. Although he seemed aware of the fact that it might be considered unusual to apply for a graduate scheme as a mature graduate, as we talked further it became apparent why he might be drawn to the idea. Before entering HE, Leo spent his entire career as the manager of a family business, and he saw his degree as an opportunity to pursue a career outside of the business. Though

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he had tried to do so previously by applying for a management position elsewhere, he explained

I was kind of knocked back a bit because I got through two interviews and to the assessment centre, but then hadn't done the particular work that they asked of me, plus I hadn't ever heard or ever done a PowerPoint presentation before.

Leo, 37-year-old male HE in FE student

As a graduate, Leo felt he would be able to offer the skills, combined with relevant experience, needed in order to pursue new opportunities. For him, the graduate scheme option represented a fresh start.

In contrast, when exploring why younger students were interested in graduate schemes, they tended to describe seeing it as a safe option:

I think it's sort of the immediacy that you're—it solves, seems secure. You're straight off getting paid, like I mean for our age it's like [a] fairly decent wage like sort of varies from eighteen to twenty-something thousand, plus you're getting trained to be in a specific role so you'll know you'll have the skills needed to do the job that's usually at the end of it, so I think it's more as like a security thing.

Alexander, 22-year-old male HE in FE student

I like [the graduate scheme option] because like you're sort of like getting trained as you're doing it, so because they understand that like you've never probably done it before...I like starting it right from the beginning as well...they understand you've just come out of university.

Ethan, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

From Alexander's perspective, the positives of graduate schemes included a reasonable salary and guaranteed training for a specific role. In addition to these benefits, Ethan adds the fact that graduate schemes start training 'from the beginning', implying that the people on them essentially have permission to be a beginner. This perspective suggests that perhaps Ethan does not feel his course has sufficiently prepared him for work, and he therefore needs to find an easy starting point in the labour market. Notably, despite being a college student, Ethan also refers to the fact that employers are aware that students on

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graduate schemes have 'just come out of university'. His word choice here is an example of how some college students use 'college' and 'university' interchangeably (a pattern introduced in 7.1.2).

Similar to Ethan, the fear of starting from scratch when entering employment was expressed by many of the younger students, even those who did not explicitly express interest in graduate schemes:

I'm interested in doing like marketing, PR, event management, or PA work, and so yeah [the degree has] kind of shown I've got the experience of the marketing and I know a bit what I'm talking about. I'm a bit worried that I actually won't know what I'm talking about when I actually get there...It's kind of like my worst nightmare—I hate being out of my depth, so I'm a bit—I don't mind being challenged and pushed a bit, but I don't want to be drowning.

Lily, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

Rather than feeling she had the skills and knowledge required to be successful at work, Lily anticipated well in advance that she would feel incapable and insecure. Therefore, her story serves as another example of college students feeling that beginning to work will require starting over rather than building on a well-developed foundation.

Indeed, like Lily, many college students expected a lack of experience to prevent them from obtaining jobs or being successful on particular career pathways. This theme was especially prevalent among both younger and mature students looking to start a career in a new area:

I want to go into HR, but I've just been looking at job advertisements and sort of basic research of it, and every single job that I've found always asks for experience, which I don't have you know and I don't even have [relevant] work experience...which is obviously a bit of a dilemma, but I have looked at going into recruitment, which is supposed to be easier to get into with a view to—well, possibly might even love it and stay there—or working my way up into HR so, obviously the qualification helps because you still need that so it's one thing I've got, but I still need to work on the experience which I haven't got with any other job. I've got obviously

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transferable skills that I can apply from my jobs but not of that industry sector.

Lucy, 35-year-old female HE in FE student

Until it shut down in the middle of her final year, just weeks before I met her, Lucy had been working in a pub. Although she had some work experience from this position, she did not have any experience she felt would be useful in the employment areas that interested her. Furthermore, she was one of the students in her cohort who did not complete a work placement during her course and consequently felt even further behind in terms of gaining relevant experience. Work placements are one area where there was a stark contrast between the opportunities available to university students versus college students in this study's sample.

College students' work placement experiences were highly variable both within and between different institutions: some had help from their college to arrange placements, and some had to arrange them on their own (if they were able to complete one at all); some were told they would have to complete a work placement for their degree, but in the end this requirement was not upheld in some cases; two students reported completing work placements as part of their foundation degree, and therefore were not required to do so (or chose not to) for their bachelor's top-up year; some ended up completing work placements after their course rather than during it, and some did both. Hence, completing a work placement was not necessarily integrated into the bachelor's degree at the colleges to the extent it was at the universities. Whereas four out of the five university students interviewed for this study

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completed work placements¹⁴⁰ as part of their bachelor's degree course, only five out of 26 college students did so (not including those who only completed one as part of a previous qualification).

Similar differences emerged in the questionnaire data. Although large numbers of students from both universities (14 students) and colleges (ten students) claimed that work placements/internships were not offered as part of their course, much higher numbers of university students than college students completed placements. Three university students claimed that completing a work placement/internship was required (compared with two college students); eight university students completed a work placement/internship, even though it was optional (compared with no college students); and seven university students said they could have completed a work placement/internship but chose not to (compared with one college student).

In addition, it seemed like the work placements undertaken by university students were more tightly regulated than those completed by college students. At Collins College, for example, Max (20-year-old male HE in FE student), who did a work placement for an IT company, said that for his work placement he *'just sat in a room for 4 hours a day'*. Similarly, Lily (20-year-old female HE in FE student) said she *'organised an event management [work placement] at [another college] in the equestrian centre, and they basically just had me opening and closing a gate all day'*. However, their colleges were not

¹⁴⁰ One student referred to his placement as an 'internship', but there did not seem to be any essential difference between his experience and that of students who completed what they called 'work placements'.

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necessarily aware of the circumstances of their work placements. In the words of Poppy,

[t]he college didn't necessarily monitor [it]...it all seemed brilliant on paper, really good, but...it wasn't particularly what you'd call work experience. It was more like being at college, like you do this, you're going to be left in a room by yourself all day and you're not going to be able to pick up any sort of skills or learn anything or get any experience from anybody; somebody you know to sort of look up to and think I want your job, I want to have your skills.

Poppy, 26-year-old female HE in FE student

As Poppy described, many students found that once the work placement was arranged, there seemed to be very little interaction between the work placement provider and the college. In fact, the one college student who completed a seemingly useful work placement during her HE experience arranged it herself rather than via the college, in part to avoid ending up in a placement that she did not want:

I think I was the one who got the best one out of everybody, because I actually [did] it myself...I didn't want the college to do it because I knew they would give me something that I didn't want to do—same as like when you did it at school...it's a good opportunity to do if you can choose it yourself rather than let the college or your school do it for you.

Olivia, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

Olivia's story highlights the fact that a college organising work placements will not necessarily lead to better outcomes, at least from the student's perspective.

When a college is directly involved in overseeing work placements, it can be difficult to manage placements on top of the other responsibilities of HE provision. At least one course leader found that arranging work placements for students was a particularly difficult aspect of offering HE in FE. Without the hands-on support of other staff members, such as careers advisors, ensuring students had placements became an added responsibility to the course leader's already overwhelming workload. Furthermore, one course leader reported that

some local employers, with whom the college often arranged work experience for FE students, seemed less willing to take on degree level students,¹⁴¹ increasing the time required to find possible placement opportunities. As course leaders and their institutions are more explicitly assessed (for funding and quality purposes) on attendance and completion rates rather than on how many of their students complete placements, it is understandable why this might be a lower priority area despite its potential contribution to students' employability.

This situation is different from that described by university students in 7.3.3, who obtained full-time, paid placements, were assigned supervisors to oversee the placements and found the experience invaluable in terms of their skills development. As Edward (22-year-old male university student) explained when describing his work placement in retail:

The degree has been helpful, but I would say that the majority of the skills I've learned have been on placement. I learnt more in that year than I did in sort of the other three years at university combined.

Edward, 22-year-old male university student

Given the fact that many college students do not complete work placements similar to Edward's during their course, it is understandable why graduate schemes might seem more appealing for them than finding an entry-level job. Work placements provide a potentially safe environment where it is acceptable to learn and make mistakes, whereas a 'normal' job might come with more pressure and higher expectations. As Edward explained:

¹⁴¹ A possible reason given for why employers were not interested in offering work placements to degree level students is that they did not necessarily benefit from such arrangements.

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[A work placement is] a lot of responsibility very early on and I did make a lot of mistakes, but you sort of learn from those mistakes, which is quite useful and it's obviously something that I've been able to take away and learn now and I know not to make those mistakes now in my actual job which is quite handy; I'm not making those mistakes early on. I've made them in the past, they're done now and I've sort of hit the ground running with it...it wasn't the end of the world if you got kicked out of your placement, but if I were sacked from my job now I'd be buggered really.

Edward, 23-year-old male university graduate

Given this perspective from someone who completed a work placement, it is possible that college students see graduate schemes as a way of making up for not always having the opportunity to complete work placements as they hoped.

However, despite the perceived benefits of graduate schemes, many college students encountered challenges when applying for them, including lack of information and inconvenient locations:

I've applied for a few [graduate schemes]...but I realise I should've applied for far more. That's the thing—I've kind of missed the boat for this September, which is kind of annoying...the only things I've found out about it are what I've researched online myself...we could've been given a bit more you know drive to do it and told the next steps and things [by the college].

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

I think the main thing for us would be specifically how to look for jobs and apply...a lot of the psychometric testing they do [for the graduate schemes]...I think I've struggled quite a lot with some of those because it's not something we've particularly done a lot of in the classroom and it's pulled me down. In quite a few I've been like denied a place because I've fallen down on that bit and not known how to get around them and stuff so, bit more help on that sort of stuff.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

You know I've been looking at graduate scheme programmes and what I've found was really bad with graduate scheme programmes is that all of them are located in London, yeah, there's nothing in [this city].

Fleur, 23-year-old female HE in FE student

As evidenced by Charlie and Phoebe's quotes, issues with the lack of information provided about graduate schemes were frequently interwoven with discussions of careers advice and guidance. In many, though not all,

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college student cases, students either did not feel they were told about graduate schemes early enough or did not feel they were given the support needed to apply. However, even in cases where students were told about such schemes at the beginning of the academic year and perhaps offered support at that stage, it is possible students did not see this information as relevant at the time and therefore focused on more immediate concerns, such as adjusting to bachelor's level education, a transition which is often difficult for these students (discussed in section 3.2.1.2). Fleur described similar issues regarding the lack of information about graduate schemes early on in her interview, to which she later added that she also found it difficult to find graduate scheme opportunities near where she lived. This problem was also expressed by many other students, particularly who either could not or did not want to move to London. Interestingly, this issue was one discussed by both students in the West Midlands and in Yorkshire. Therefore, the West Midlands being slightly closer to London did not seem to make a difference as to whether students identified their distance from the city as a problem.

Although a couple of university students also mentioned graduate schemes as a post-graduation possibility, they were framed as one of many options rather than their preferred option. Unlike college students, they did not express any concerns with regard to how to find or apply for such schemes.

8.2.4 Salary expectations

In terms of salary, 39 per cent of the university students who took the questionnaire for this study expected to earn between £21,000-£29,999 per year (before income tax, National Insurance and other deductions) immediately

after completing their course, compared with 36 per cent of college students. While this range was the most common answer for university students, a larger proportion of college students (44 per cent) expected to earn between £10,000-£20,999, which only 29 per cent of university students estimated. Interestingly, the second most popular answer for university students was an even higher range, with 32 per cent expecting to earn between £30,000-£39,999, whereas only 14 per cent of college respondents gave this answer.¹⁴² Therefore, university students generally appear to have higher salary expectations than college students, with 71 per cent of university respondents expecting to earn more than £21,000 compared with 50 per cent of college respondents.

During interviews, neither university nor college students tended to provide an exact figure for what they expected to be earning immediately after graduation.¹⁴³ When students described their long-term salary expectations, many students, particularly younger college students, were primarily concerned with being 'happy' and 'comfortable' rather than having a particular salary. Responses from Charlie and Ethan exemplify the way in which this view was expressed:

I don't know, I mean it's very hard to answer that question because I don't know where I want to be particularly, so...I don't really, it sounds really cheesy, but...as long as I'm earning enough money to enjoy my lifestyle and enjoy the work—that will be happy.

Charlie, 24-year-old male HE in FE student

I wouldn't say there's a [salary] figure [I have in mind]...as long as I was comfortable I suppose, so I could have an okay house and a nice car and some beer just if I wanted to. Basically I wouldn't say I have to earn £100,000 or whatever the amount is so I can do what I want to do I suppose.

Ethan, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

¹⁴² No university students chose the lowest (£0-£9,999) or highest (more than £40,000) brackets, whereas one college student chose each of these.

¹⁴³ Actual salary outcomes are discussed in 8.3.2.

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The most notable aspect of this perspective is that it often did not include many specifics. In contrast, a couple of university students expected to have high earnings, though not until they reached the 'top' of their career, and not necessarily just from their jobs:

It would be about £80,000...coming towards the end of my career—probably a bit more. But...I'm also looking at branching out in property development and that sort of thing and investing in other areas. I've always been keen to invest in sort of things as well as my job and my career to sort of build my earnings as much as possible.

Edward, 22-year-old male HE in FE student

While Edward clearly expected to reach the upper echelons of salary, his estimation was based upon a career in a particular industry combined with additional income streams. Hence, his expectations were based on an idea of what he thought might be realistic given his career aspirations and interest in property development. Although his expectations are not necessarily more or less realistic than Charlie's or Ethan's, they are definitely more specific.

8.2.5 Long-term employment expectations

Despite the focus of some on particular areas of interest or graduate schemes, most college students expected it to be difficult to find a job, particularly an ideal one. Their primary concern was finding employment that allowed them to live comfortably. For example, even though Olivia aspired to work in banking, she was willing to take something else if necessary:

My main aim is really just to have a job because I know how hard it is recently to get, like [with] people out of employment and stuff, so even if it's not in what I want to do, at least I'm going to have something until something comes up which is more what I want to do.

Olivia, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

Although Olivia recognised the potential difficulty in securing a job, she also remained hopeful that she would eventually find something 'which is more

what [she] want[s] to do'. Later on in her interview, Olivia added, '*don't they say that you have so many jobs in your lifetime before you have your dream job or something, you do so many before that anyway*'. Hence, even though she was not sure she would land it immediately after graduating, her 'imagined future' (Ball, Macrea and Maguire, 1999; Goodlad and Thompson, 2007) still held the possibility of eventually having her dream job.

Although university students also wanted to do well in the labour market, the idea of having a 'dream job' did not feature in their descriptions of their future. Instead, they tended to have clearly defined goals for what they might be doing in the next five years. For students who obtained jobs as a result of work placements, there was even some involvement from their future employers in making these plans. For instance, when I asked Edward where he would like to be in five years' time, he said:

[My employer has] given me sort of a five-year career progression plan, so in five years' time they expect me to be leading my own store or developed into a head office role as sort of mid-level management really, which would be ideal.

Edward, 22-year-old male university student

While Edward was satisfied with his longer-term career path, he also clearly had support from his future employer in showing him what might be appropriate and achievable within a certain period. Unlike Olivia, he did not need to think about having a few jobs he did not like before finding his 'dream job', because his goal of succeeding in a retail career already seemed achievable.

8.2.6 Applying for jobs and further study

An additional challenge that college graduates face when applying for jobs is which institution (their college or the partner university) to list as their

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degree provider on application forms. This issue was particularly significant for the students in this study because they completed all of their HE qualifications, from level 4 through to level 6, at colleges. Unlike other HE in FE students, who may have experienced provision at both types of institution, these students had not attended a university at any point during their course.

When students were asked during their final year interviews which institution they would list on job applications, some had not yet considered this issue. Although earlier in his interview Alexander expressed concern that people would not think a college-taught degree to be as good as a university-taught one, minutes later he interestingly referred to the separate institutions as 'one and the same thing'.

I didn't even think of that to be honest. Originally until [now] I would've just put [the name of the college]. I'll probably put [the name of the college] and [the partner university] because they are linked—both one and the same thing.

Alexander, 22-year-old male HE in FE student

As evidenced, simply being asked how Alexander would answer this question seemed to change the way he thought about how he might respond. However, in a post-graduation interview with Lily, who attended the same college as Alexander, she explained:

[w]e got told by our college to put the name of the university, so I put the name of the university [on applications].

Lily, 21-year-old female HE in FE graduate

Therefore, it seems that at some point in the year between interviews, students might have been advised in more detail how to address this issue.

Even without advice from their college, though, students found they sometimes could not use their college's name, even if they wanted to. Phoebe

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described how she developed the habit of using the university's name due to the limitations of some application forms:

I usually put [the university's name]...I actually got into the habit of it more when I was applying for graduate schemes because a lot of them didn't give the option of [the college] as where you'd earned your degree from. I usually just dropped down the box and put [the university] in. I just got in the habit of writing that down I think.

Phoebe, 21-year old female HE in FE graduate

Accordingly, it seems that as far as employers are concerned, most HE in FE students appear to be university graduates on their application forms even if they attended a college for their degree. Clearly, there are situations, such as institution-based careers fairs, when employers will know exactly where students were taught. However, because it seems that graduates are not always required to declare where they were taught on application forms, there are almost certainly cases where employers think they have recruited university graduates but have actually recruited college graduates.

It is possible this might not be the case in situations where students are asked to provide transcripts or degree certificates rather than simply list which institution awarded their degree. Students from all three colleges¹⁴⁴ included in post-graduation interviews said that while the partner university's name tended to be bigger, their degree certificate also included their college's name and/or logo. Scarlett explained how the bachelor's degree certificate compared with her foundation degree one, which was more clearly associated with the college:

¹⁴⁴ No students from Forster College participated in the post-graduation interviews.

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In the foundation degree, the [college] symbol was much more prominent [on the certificate], but in the end degree it's very equal and so it looks like a [partner university] degree...we were very happy with it at the end because we thought if it was going to be very college-related it might not be as professional...that's one of the stigmas attached to doing anything at a college really.

Scarlett, 41-year-old female HE in FE graduate

As Scarlett describes, many college students were keen to keep their association with the college to a minimum when applying for jobs or further study, largely because of their concerns about the college being seen as less professional than a university. Chloe, who attended the same college as Scarlett and started a master's degree at a university after completing her bachelor's, explained a bit more about the issue of professionalism and college reputation:

I'd say it wasn't, unfortunately, [the college] wasn't as much of a professional environment [as a university], and when you're a bit more of a mature student and you're trying to do something that's meant to create a pathway and create a future, it's very difficult to be sharing that building and sharing that space with people that are potentially ten years or more younger than you and they don't have the same motivation. There just wasn't the physical space in the rooms and location and just the amount of space for us to be able to do that, so I'd definitely say that's a massive difference in the way the institutions are run.

Chloe, 25-year-old female HE in FE graduate

Even if people outside the college are not aware of this dynamic within the college, students seem concerned about what others might think of them having completed their degree in such an environment.

8.2.7 Summary of students' expectations

When asked what they would do after they graduated, at least half of the students in this study from both types of institution planned to obtain employment related to longer-term career plans. However, in general, college students expressed much more uncertainty and insecurity with regard to entering the labour market than university students, who seemed to have more

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clarity and direction as to what they planned to do after graduation. This institutional difference could be in part because university students were more likely to complete a work placement during their course, which provided relevant experience that could help them get a job. This difference might also explain why many college students were drawn to graduate schemes, which represented a safe and secure starting place in employment. However, college students faced a number of challenges or barriers in attempting to apply for or access these schemes, including a lack of adequate information and preparation for the application process. College students' lack of clarity and direction are further evidenced in their longer-term employment expectations, which seem general and undefined compared to those of university students.

In terms of salary, most college students have lower expectations than university students in the short term, with only 50 per cent expecting to earn over £21,000 compared with 71 per cent of university students. Longer-term salary expectations are more variable; although some college students and university students have high expectations, some university students have clearer and more diversified ways of planning to reach their salary aspirations.

When applying for jobs or further study, most college students in this study chose to list their university as their degree provider. While some of them did this out of necessity, many were grateful to distance themselves from their college in this way due to concerns about how attending the college might have been perceived as less desirable than attending a university. Those who felt they had to use their university's name were either told to do so by their college or were not able to select a college name from drop-down lists on some electronic application forms. Overall, students' expectations reveal that

graduates from universities and colleges enter the labour market with varying degrees of confidence with regard to what they will do and how they will perform.

8.3 Graduates' outcomes

8.3.1 Employment or further study outcomes

As explained in the introduction to this chapter, only half of the original sample of students in this study participated in the post-graduation round of data collection. Consequently, findings about students' outcomes are based on the experiences of 15 self-selected students, including five university graduates and ten college graduates. Since all of the eligible university students interviewed participated in both rounds, their reported outcomes reflect the entire sample. As only ten college graduates participated in the second round, their outcomes account for less than half of the original sample and therefore cannot be taken as representative of the full sample.

Although I did not speak directly to any of the 15 college students who did not participate in the second round of interviews, I learned through interviews with other students that some of them were not pleased about their outcomes, which could have made them hesitant to participate. For example, one interviewee explained that a friend from her cohort (who had participated in the first round of interviews) was disappointed to not have found a new job after graduation and did not want to be asked questions about the situation. He was hoping that HE was going to have a positive impact on his career, and as of one year after graduation, he felt that his degree had led to very little impact.

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Stories like this one demonstrate that the outcomes reported by interviewees about their own experiences likely do not represent the range of actual college graduate outcomes, especially considering the larger data available about outcomes for HE in FE graduates. For instance, the HE in FE DLHE report (HEFCE, 2013a: 10), which used outcomes data from 2010/11, showed that 16 per cent of graduates from full-time HE in FE first degree programmes were assumed to be unemployed within six months of graduation.¹⁴⁵ In addition, full-time first degree qualifiers who were registered at an FEC, as all college students in this study were, had a higher assumed unemployment figure (16 per cent) than franchised students (11 per cent) or students who were registered and taught at HEIs (10 per cent) (HEFCE, 2013a: 23). These numbers suggest that the sample for this study included at least some students who would have been unemployed after graduation. It is also possible that some of them, like the student mentioned above, were employed but simply had not seen much progression following their HE experience.

In general, the UK's economic situation in the months following graduation for these students (which took place in the summer of 2013) was improving. In February 2014, a report from the Office for National Statistics claimed that the last quarter of 2013 saw the strongest economic growth that the country had experienced since before the global financial crisis (Wales, 2014: 1). The UK's on-going economic recovery was also evident through the decreasing level of unemployment (*ibid.*, p. 8). In addition, media coverage indicated that as of 2014, the graduate labour market was showing signs of

¹⁴⁵ This figure is notably higher than the assumed unemployment rate for all other HE in FE categories, meaning that bachelor's graduates from college may be the most likely HE in FE qualifiers to be unemployed after graduation (HEFCE, 2013a: 10).

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recovery (Monaghan, 2014). Nevertheless, while the graduates from this study may have entered a more buoyant labour market than they would have prior to 2013, it is important to point out that the language used at the time centred on *recovery*. In other words, the economy was getting better than it had been recently, but not necessarily better than it had been before 2008.

Of the 15 students (both from colleges and universities) who provided post-graduation interview data, 12 were in full-time employment within one year after graduation. All of the students employed full-time held business-related positions in a wide range of industries, including retail, safety, food production, marketing, logistics, beauty, insurance, travel accommodation and finance. One student who was not employed was a university graduate who chose to take a gap year between graduation and starting a graduate scheme at a consultancy firm. The other two who were not in full-time employment were college graduates pursuing one-year master's degrees at universities; one in Marine Environmental Management and one in Leadership and Management. Both of these students graduated from the same college but were attending two different universities in the same area as the college. Neither master's student was employed alongside their course, although they had worked part-time throughout their undergraduate course.

One of the interesting discrepancies that emerged when exploring outcomes with students was the divide between what students valued about their HE experience: gaining practical experience or theoretical knowledge. Whereas university students seemed to really value the practical experience gained through their work placements, college students seemed to value the

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theoretical knowledge gained through their degrees. For example, when I asked Edward whether his degree had prepared him for his job, he said:

For the role that I'm in now, the project management side, I'd say that it did prepare me very well, you know, it's a lot of looking at processes, and mapping and analysing and developing solutions and actions so...for that side of things I think it's fantastic. In [the] store, it's a bit more about experience rather than textbook learning. It's probably the experience from [my work placement] that helped me the most there.

Edward, 23-year-old male university graduate

While Edward did find some of his in-class learning at university useful, he seemed to equally value the practical experience gained through his work placement. Because of this, it is possible that he may have been less prepared for his job without his previous experience, regardless of the fact that his project management knowledge helped him with some aspects of it. In fact, later in his interview, Edward discussed how going to university leads to this situation:

You sometimes get those people that have done three years at university, done a lot of exams, but you stick them into a working world situation and they're just trying to keep their head above the water...there's sort of merit in the practical side of things as well as the academic side of things and a bit more relevant experience can help you massively.

Edward, 23-year-old male university graduate

In contrast, college students tended to describe how much they began to notice the use of theoretical knowledge at work after graduation:

You don't realise what you learn on your degree until you actually kind of see it every day...when you actually finish and go into full-time work and to be honest...it just brings back memories of certain theories and models and that—what you actually read in the book—and it's like people do actually use them, which is quite surprising.

Max, 21-year-old male HE in FE graduate

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As a whole, it was all very useful—it's things that I would never have known or maybe looked at from a theoretical point of view before...when I'm doing something in marketing, I wouldn't necessarily look at it and think well actually, there's a name for that and the reason I'm doing it is this. You don't actually analyse what you're doing, you just think it's very standard, day-to-day...[you] don't realise that actually, there's quite a lot behind it.

Abigail, 40-year-old female HE in FE graduate

Since neither Max nor Abigail changed positions or companies after completing their degrees, it was eye opening for them to see how what they learned on the course integrated with their jobs. For Max, it was only through witnessing what he had learned being used by other people that he came to see the potential value of understanding theory himself. Similarly, Abigail felt she had developed an entirely new perspective on key aspects of her business, and theoretical knowledge provided a new way of engaging with her decision-making. Yet even in cases where college students did not feel they would actively use theoretical knowledge, felt that they understood more as a result of having it:

I think I've got a lot more knowledge than I think I have because I know a lot more, I understand a lot more...I haven't had to use theory but I think all that theory that I did has helped my understanding of business in general, even though I probably won't use it ever again.

Lily, 21-year-old female HE in FE graduate

Unlike Max and Abigail, Lily is one of the graduates who really struggled to find a job after graduation. Therefore, it is notable that even though she is not certain she will use theory, she does feel that knowing it has benefited her.

Taking all of these responses together, it seems both practical experience and theoretical knowledge are valuable for students upon completion of their degrees. However, it does remain questionable whether both are necessary in order to obtain and perform the jobs that graduates do. For college students, experience tended to be framed as a 'must-have' and

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theoretical knowledge as a 'nice-to-have'. For instance, even though Max could see theory being useful, he was not entirely convinced that completing a degree was necessary:

I'm definitely glad that I went and did [my degree], although I'm still debating whether or not it's money well spent or not, I don't know, but we'll find out.

Max, 21-year-old male HE in FE graduate

Although Max believed that he might have a better idea five or ten years after graduating, he went on to say that *'at the minute, I personally don't think it's been money well spent...but that's just purely because I'd kind of already walked into a job while I was still doing the degree'*. In fact, he was told that the only reason he had not been promoted to full-time sooner is because his predecessor was aware he was in full-time education. Because of this experience, he framed the degree as a barrier rather than a gateway, at least in the short-term. At the same time, Max recognised the possibility that he might not see the employment-related benefits of his degree until later in his career.

While three out of five university students obtained full-time jobs as a direct or indirect¹⁴⁶ result of work placements completed during their course, no college students obtained jobs this way, though one did move into a full-time version of the part-time position he already had. College students either started master's programmes (two students); stayed in the jobs they held during their studies (two students); progressed within their company (two students); or obtained new jobs at companies where they had never worked (four students). The number of jobs for which college students applied ranged from none (in the case of those who did not change companies) to approximately 200. The

¹⁴⁶ Two students accepted full-time positions at the companies where they completed their work placements. One student completed a work placement at a retail firm and was subsequently offered a full-time position at another firm due to his work placement experience.

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two university students who did not have jobs as of graduation also reported high numbers of applications, with one of them applying for around 100 jobs and the other for 80. Neither of the college students who began master's degrees reported applying for jobs, as both made the decision to pursue postgraduate education before the end of their final year; one student had already applied for a master's programme at a university and been accepted by the time I interviewed her in January, and the other, who was also interviewed in January, was planning to apply in February.

Most students did not need their degree in order to perform their jobs. In fact, other than the master's students (both of whom required a bachelor's degree to apply), only two interviewees (both university graduates) listed a degree as a job requirement. A couple of students reported needing either fewer qualifications or more experience to be considered for certain jobs:

I am struggling for my applications to be taken further as organisations seem to be seeking candidates that are experienced and ready to go.

Lily, 21-year-old female HE in FE graduate

I have to say it is quite stressful and disheartening applying for so many jobs and getting no after no! I seemed to suffer from lack of experience, which is why I volunteered in order to gain some.

Lucy, 36-year-old female HE in FE graduate

Although lack of experience and being over-qualified were sometimes barriers to moving forward in application processes, students more frequently said that softer skills, such as positivity, independence and flexibility, were also seen as very important, and even more important than experience or qualifications in some cases. Along these lines, one interviewee said that his company 'hires for personality and trains for skills' (Edward, 23-year-old male university graduate).

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Despite not always needing a degree to apply, most college and university students felt it would or did play a role in helping them get their jobs:

I wouldn't not have [a degree] because...I feel like they're becoming a bit more of a common entity now. You need one to get a job, but...I think a lot of students are...getting jobs where they don't need the degree they've got to do it.

Phoebe, 20-year-old female HE in FE student¹⁴⁷

I needed [a degree] to be able to try and get a job, but it won't make me stand out compared to other candidates because they're all also going to have degrees. I think I'm just going to be on par with them whereas before it would make you stand out.

Lily, 20-year-old female HE in FE student

I got the opportunity from having the degree...had I not been doing the degree, I wouldn't have done the placement year and would never have got the role because the role wasn't advertised. But that said, the [other] girl...who kind of works in the same role as me, she doesn't have a degree...so in that sense, no, a degree's not necessary for the role, but it was my gateway.

Rosie, 25-year-old female university graduate

Therefore, while a degree might not have been a requirement for employment, students believed it played a key role in helping them get their jobs.

In contrast to the more general business courses at other colleges, the one at Gardiner College focused in particular on teaching business management. Unlike students at other colleges, the students at Gardiner College were all mature and worked full-time alongside their course, with many of them owning their own businesses. Therefore, students' outcomes from this institution included changes they made to their business as a result of the course. For example, Abigail described how her business, of which she was Managing

¹⁴⁷ Both this quote from Phoebe and the one from Lily below it come from pre-graduation interviews, which is why each is called a 'student' rather than a 'graduate'.

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Director, was pursuing new opportunities as a result of a lecture she heard while a student:

We have been working on the internationalisation of the company to take a franchise route into the export market and we've internationalised all of our product and packaging sort of into 14 languages...there was actually a lecture [during the course] specifically where we discussed franchising and I can remember thinking this would suit me and actually speaking to [the course leader] afterwards to say I think this is something [the company] could look at.

Abigail, 40-year-old female HE in FE graduate

Likewise, other graduates in management positions, such as Jack, described how the course benefited them at work:

I believe I am a better manager. I certainly have no fear about anything or any situation that arises in the workplace [now].

Jack, 43-year-old male HE in FE graduate

Although graduates like Abigail and Jack found ways to integrate skills and knowledge from the course, other Gardiner College graduates who were not in management positions found it less straightforward to do so:

I can't say I have much opportunity to use most of the skills I gained on the course in my current role as I'm not a senior manager.

Nick, 32-year-old male HE in FE graduate

Despite not finding opportunities to use skills from his degree in his current role, both Nick and other students from Gardiner College mentioned the possibility of one day starting and running their own business, which they now felt equipped to do.

A final group whose outcomes are worth exploring is that of the two college graduates pursuing master's degrees immediately following their bachelor's. These two graduates attended different universities, and they both described their personal experience of adjusting to a non-college environment. When asked whether the bachelor's prepared her for the master's, Chloe said:

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Yes and no. No because, it wasn't really the fault of the course, more the institution in which I studied. [The college] is absolutely great, but it was really hard for me to adapt to going from somewhere where there was no quiet place in which I could study at [the college] to then at [the university] just having an absolutely ginormous library and endless areas of quiet and silence where we could just go, and it's a much bigger campus, so I think that makes a huge difference. [The college] gave me the confidence to study something like that, and we also received a lot of feedback so I'd also say that definitely prepared me. And also because you study such a broad range as well, it gives you a nice understanding of the whole subject area.

Chloe, 24-year-old female HE in FE student

The level of work that I knew I had to do is the same—everything else is different. The environment is slightly different; the fact that I'm the only white person on my course—that is not what I expected in the slightest. Having to get on with lots of people who don't speak very good English at all is also really difficult, and I didn't expect that, but you know I have to take it as a learning experience and that's what I'm doing.

Scarlett, 40-year-old female HE in FE student

While Chloe and Scarlett felt that the course content at college prepared them for master's level, they both noticed a stark contrast in terms of their day-to-day experience. For Chloe, the most obvious difference was the physical characteristics of the institution. Whereas she found it difficult at college to find private, quiet space in which to study, this problem was not one she experienced at university.

For Scarlett, it was the proportion of international students in her cohort that seemed to surprise her the most. While at college, international students were a small minority, it was Scarlett who was in the minority at university, and she did not necessarily see this as a positive. In fact, she mentioned that during her induction week, one of the administrators commented that it was unusual to receive an application for that course from a home student. After the closeness Scarlett experienced with her cohort at Bennett College, this aspect of university life was disappointing. However, this

difference is not necessarily entirely down to type of institution, as there is some evidence that international students 'are clearer about the benefits of studying in a diverse environment than those home students who have chosen to remain in the UK to study' (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2015). Therefore, Scarlett's preference for the college in this instance was embedded in her desire to be surrounded by home students, rather than specific benefits only the college could offer.

8.3.2 Salary outcomes

In comparison to their salary expectations (reported in 8.2.4), salaries reported by university graduates ranged from £10,000 to £32,000 per year, with an average of £21,000 per year.¹⁴⁸ For college graduates, salaries ranged from £16,000 to £19,500 per year, with an average of £18,250 per year.¹⁴⁹ In addition to their basic salary, some students also reported that they would receive various benefits, such as annual pay rises, profit share and commission bonuses, subsidised training and access to a pension scheme. Such benefits were more likely to be reported by university graduates than college graduates.¹⁵⁰ Notably, the majority of graduates in this study in full-time employment were under the £21,000 threshold required in order to begin paying back their student loans.

¹⁴⁸ This average excludes one graduate who provided a salary range (between £20,000 to £25,000 per year) rather than an exact figure.

¹⁴⁹ This average excludes the two students pursuing postgraduate study, who were not employed, and two who were working full-time prior to completing their degree and stayed in the same roles.

¹⁵⁰ The fact that such benefits were more likely to be *reported* by university graduates does not necessarily mean that university graduates were more likely to *have* them. It might be that college graduates did not consider benefits part of their salary and therefore did not include this aspect of their employment package when responding to this question.

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According to Parry et al. (2012: 80), the median salary of leavers with a bachelor's degree in business and administrative studies (using data from 2008-10) was £18,000 for university graduates and £15,500 for college graduates.¹⁵¹ Therefore, all but one graduate in this study (a university graduate earning £10,000 per year) were earning above the median amount reported in Parry et al.'s (ibid.) study for their type of institution in 2014.¹⁵² In addition, the salary differential between university and college graduates in this study (£2,750) is similar to that reported by Parry et al. (2012: 80) for business and administrative studies students (£2,500).

Of the three young college graduates¹⁵³ who were employed at the point post-graduation interviews, two of them reported being satisfied with their salaries. Although the third said he was generally happy with his salary given the level of his job, he also had aspirations to earn more through moving into a commission-based sales role. Out of the four university graduates in employment after graduation,¹⁵⁴ one reported dissatisfaction with his salary. It is important to note, though, that his disappointment seemed to be more closely linked to his job than to his salary specifically.

¹⁵¹ Both of these figures are lower than those for students who completed 'other undergraduate' qualifications at HEIs (£24,000) and FECs (£20,000) during the same time period (Parry et al., 2012: 80). This difference could be due to the fact that many students pursuing other undergraduate qualifications work full-time alongside their course and therefore start from a higher threshold. For example, students in Parry et al.'s (2012: 113) study taking an HNC/HND were more likely than other qualification groups to be working full-time.

¹⁵² The difference in salary levels between this study and Parry et al.'s (2012) can likely be explained by the gradual salary increases that take place over time.

¹⁵³ Salary was not discussed in detail with the three mature graduates (all of whom attended colleges) who participated in post-graduation interviews. One of them was not employed (while pursuing her master's degree) and the other two were in the same jobs they had during their course.

¹⁵⁴ One university graduate was due to start a graduate scheme in the autumn but was in the middle of a gap year when interviewed.

8.3.3 Comparing students' expectations and outcomes

While there are some differences between university and college graduates' outcomes, they are not as drastic as one might expect. Reviewing the post-graduation data available, two differences stand out:

1. University graduates are more likely than college graduates to obtain full-time employment as a direct or indirect result of that work placement or internship.
2. University graduates tend to have higher salaries than college graduates, but college graduates have more realistic salary expectations than university graduates.

Although the sample in this study is small, these findings align with larger trends in research about graduate employment. With regard to the first difference, what could be called a 'work placement advantage', there is mixed evidence as to whether this phenomenon is consistent across the wider graduate population. On the one hand, Wilton (2012: 618) found that while work placements are lauded 'in the rhetoric of policy makers, employers and higher education institutions', this stance is not necessarily backed by quantitative evidence of 'either greater reported skills development or superior labour market achievement'. On the other hand, using more recent data, McCullough (2013: 88) found that HE graduates 'who had undertaken both work-based learning and paid work had the most positive labour market outcomes'. As a result, there is at least some evidence that undertaking a work placement or internship can contribute to students successfully finding post-graduation employment. Of course, a key issue for this sample is the fact that there are apparently significant differences in the likelihood of a college student completing a full-time, paid work placement similar to one which might be completed by a university student.

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With regard to the second difference, there is clear evidence elsewhere of university students earning more than college students immediately after graduation. According to the HE in FE DLHE, which compared salary data for first degree qualifiers from HEIs and colleges, 49 per cent of HEI graduates were earning over £20,000 six months after leaving HE compared with only 28 per cent of FEC graduates (HEFCE, 2013a: 12). Although these percentages, particularly that for FEC graduates, must be viewed with caution due to the relatively low numbers¹⁵⁵ upon which they are based, they are nevertheless important to consider due to how they compare with the salary expectations reported above. Due to a lack of data, it is as yet not clear how the longer-term earnings of college graduates might compare with their university counterparts.

In terms of how students' outcomes compare with their own expectations, there are four key findings to discuss. First, it seems that younger college students were right to be sceptical as to how much having a degree would help them in the labour market (6.2 discussed the scepticism of younger students about the value of having a degree). While all of the younger college students (with the exception of the one pursuing her master's) that participated in post-graduation interviews found jobs, none of their jobs required a degree in order to apply, and they did not feel that the skills obtained through their degree were needed in order to do their jobs. However, there is some evidence of how pursuing a degree indirectly helped them find employment. For example, one of the students obtained her eventual job through a contact of her tutor's. Therefore, the network she gained through

¹⁵⁵ HEFCE (2013a: 7-8) data shows that 3,560 HE in FE first-degree qualifiers provided a full survey response, which is a 60 per cent response rate. The equivalent DLHE survey, which provided the HEI findings, included 396,650 respondents, which was just over a 75 per cent response rate (HESA, 2012a).

completing her degree proved to be valuable.

Second, some university students seemed to overestimate how easy it would be to get a graduate job after completing their degrees. Both of the university graduates who did not obtain jobs following work placements reported wishing they had started looking for jobs much earlier, even though both had submitted numerous applications by the end of their final year.

Third, students who pursue a postgraduate course at a university after attending a college describe a tangible difference in the environment between the two. While each has its benefits, they are clearly not the same from the student perspective. The fact that students have experienced this first-hand lends evidence to some of the institutional differences presumed to exist.

Finally, mature students who were working full-time in advance of their top-up degree seem to have the closest alignment between their expectations and outcomes. This result is possibly because, as they already have jobs, their expectations are more realistic in terms of the extent to which they will be able to implement the skills and knowledge gained from the course.

8.3.4 Personal outcomes from higher education

In addition to their employment outcomes, many college students during both rounds of interviews described a number of personal outcomes resulting from completing the course. For example, many felt that undertaking their course improved their confidence levels:

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I've learnt a lot from it—definitely learnt a lot. I've definitely boosted my confidence because like, because where we, I live like on the seaside, so it's like a little—live in the middle of nowhere basically. So I didn't really, I didn't really go out a lot, whereas and then I've come here, I've been to [the city] every day and it's like—it was a big change to begin with, but it's been, it's been worth it.

Max, 20-year-old male HE in FE student

For me, it's got to be the confidence that it's given me. I didn't have much—a lot of people that know me would think...that I'm full of self-esteem and confidence and stuff. But since I've been doing this, my final year, it's like it's all clicked into place—I finally think that I understand things.

Imogen, 29-year-old female HE in FE student

I think getting confidence is sort of the main thing for me...[c]ertain things I've thought oh, don't think that's really benefited me, but a lot of it I think confidence wise has because you think actually I do know what I'm talking about now.

Caroline, mature female HE in FE student

Although Max, Imogen and Caroline experienced newfound confidence as a result of completing their bachelor's degrees, different aspects of the course contributed to this development. For Max, confidence grew from branching out of his local village and attending college in the city, whereas for Imogen and Caroline, learning the content of the course made a difference. Indeed, some students described how the content of the course had other, more unexpected effects on their lives, such as in this story from Abigail:

Definitely I would say my language has changed...not just on the course, but outside I hear myself using words that I wouldn't have used [before]. My mum said something to me this morning and I said well if you stopped procrastinating and got on with it, and I then actually, I made a joke out of myself—I said oh, that's a word I've learned at uni...I wouldn't have said that to my mum before, and I notice myself using words that I wouldn't have used before this course, so I mean it's had benefits other than being able to write an assignment.

Abigail, 39-year-old female HE in FE student

In addition to Abigail discussing her vocabulary changing, it is noteworthy that she described herself as learning these words 'at uni'. This use of language links

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to the previous description in 7.1.2 of students using college and university interchangeably in certain contexts.

The theme of language introduced by Abigail also came through in other interviews, especially with other mature students. For instance, Isaac described how his confidence, especially with regard to understanding 'big words', changed interactions during meetings at work:

If I've had meetings at work, like I'd always get involved with a lot of high-level meetings I just, I didn't ever really want to speak...I'd just sit in the corner and be quiet, but now I'm straight in there and I think I can actually back up what I'm saying now...you know you ask me something and I'll cover myself with what's required, but in the past I thought [I] don't really want to join in with all the big words and this is how it's going to be.

Isaac, 43-year-old male HE in FE student

Although some students, like Abigail and Isaac, provided specific examples of the impact completing the course had on their lives, others seemed to simply feel proud of themselves for pursuing it:

I think as much as anything I've exceeded my expectations because...my [school] reports used to say 'class clown' and my friends' reports used to say 'could do well if they didn't hang out with [him]'. So that was what I used to be like and I think my most positive experience would be that I've actually you know I'm doing really well at this and it's sort of finally I'm doing something good.

Charlie, 25-year-old male HE in FE student

Stories like Charlie's and the others' told above demonstrate that one of the key course outcomes for college students was not obtaining a particular job, but gaining the confidence that successfully completing a bachelor's degree—something many of them never thought they would do—gave them. For these students, many of whom do not consider themselves to be 'academic', the significance of this outcome outweighs many of the others.

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Although it would be difficult to argue that university students do not develop confidence and pride as a result of completing a bachelor's degree, it does not seem to emerge in conversation with them to the extent it does with college students. Instead, the personal outcomes university students describe are highly individualised, though often focused on the career development opportunities gained through their course. For instance, when I asked Edward about the positive aspects of his university experience, he said:

[p]ositives would be sort of the opportunities it's given me, so I had the year placement on the course, I've done a Chartered Management diploma outside of university that was offered by the university, working with the Student Union—it's sort of, the university as a whole, it's sort of the opportunities it gives you to sort of completely enhance your CV and present yourself to companies a sort of more rounded and complete person.

Edward, 22-year-old male university student

While this description of Edward's outcomes is personal in the sense that it relates to him being a well-rounded individual, these outcomes clearly have a more employment-orientated slant than the college responses. Likewise, Rosie discussed her outcomes from the perspective of whether taking out her student loans was worth it:

I think the fact that the degree has got me the opportunities it's got, it's invaluable. And if I have to forego £10 a month [to pay off my student loans], then so be it...I think if I'm short of money, I'm going to start complaining about tax and [National Insurance] way before I start complaining about my student loan.

Rosie, 24-year-old female university student

Therefore, whereas college students seem to value how the degree makes them feel about themselves, university students value the external opportunities it offers, such as work placements and employment opportunities.

8.4 Conclusions about graduates' expectations and outcomes

Even when following the same qualification in the same subject area, students at colleges and universities differ in their post-graduation expectations and outcomes. Differences in these areas largely stem from aspects of the college student experience that contribute to a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among these students (but not their university counterparts) as they enter the graduate labour market. For example, despite the fact that universities validated the degrees earned by students in this study, college graduates' degree certificates named both the partner university and the college they attended.¹⁵⁶ This circumstance presented a challenge for some college graduates when applying for jobs, as they had to decide whether to list their university's name, their college's name or both when applications asked about their education. While some college graduates found it necessary to use their partner university's name (due to, for example, the restrictions of online application forms that did not include colleges' names in drop-down menus), others who could have used their college's name chose to use the university's name instead. In some of these cases, students thought that it sounded better to potential employers for them to have graduated from a university rather than a college. In other cases, students' colleges advised them to list the university's name instead of the college's name. While it is possible that some colleges gave this advice due to terms and conditions within their validation arrangements (i.e. universities required their name to be used), it is also plausible that colleges, like their

¹⁵⁶ Some graduates either did not discuss their degree certificates or said they could not remember whether both institutions' names were listed. Those who did discuss the certificates and were able to describe them said that both institutions' names were included.

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students, thought that using the university's name might sound better to employers.

If applicants (and those giving them advice) believe that employers prefer university graduates, then it makes sense why—especially when entering a competitive graduate labour market—they might choose to use their university's name on job applications. The data available about employers' perspectives on recruiting graduates from colleges versus universities (reviewed in 3.2.4) is so limited that it is difficult to say whether this difference matters during application processes. Still, the fact that these graduates can appear as if they were taught at an institution they did not attend could be confusing, and potentially be seen as misleading, from the employer's perspective. As a result, this situation does raise some questions about whether employers should be given (or ask for) more information as to the nature of a graduate's qualifications.

It also leads to questions as to whether being associated with a college makes graduates feel somehow less valued (or less valuable) than university graduates. While college students claim to finish their degree feeling more confident about themselves, they do not necessarily seem confident that their course or their college adequately prepare them for further study or employment. Instead, some feel their college-based HE experience could hinder rather than help their progression due to the perceived reputation others have of college-based education. As a result, this aspect of their experience becomes part of their identity that some college graduates feel hesitant to reveal.

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Of course, this experience was not the same across the board. Mature students in full-time employment during their course, for example, were not nearly as concerned about people's perceptions of their college-based education as were younger students with limited experience or mature students looking to change careers. It also seemed less of an issue for students applying for postgraduate courses, who presumably had to be more explicit in the application process about the nature of their HE qualifications. Nevertheless, most students expressed a sense of pride at having a university-validated degree certificate, regardless of whether they 'needed' the university's name.

Following graduation, most students from both universities and colleges in this study planned to obtain employment related to longer-term career plans rather than pursue other possible post-graduation options (e.g. take a postgraduate course, take time out, etc.). Although they shared this overarching aim, university students had clearer ideas than college students about both their short and long-term post-graduation plans. While most college students had a general idea of what they would like to do, they lacked the direction exhibited by most university students. In other words, college students could describe what they would like to do, whereas university students would explain what they were going to do, and also add how they were going to do it.

Since colleges are institutions with inherently supportive environments and built-in connections to local employers (Parry et al., 2012), it might be expected that their students would be well placed to receive excellent support with regard to careers advice and guidance. However, this does not seem to be the case, at least for the colleges in this study. While college students reported

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receiving some careers-related training, such as through personal and professional development modules, the colleges did not have strongly established formal mechanisms to help students complete a work placement or internship prior to graduating. While four out of the five university students interviewed in this study completed work placements during their bachelor's degree course, only five out of the 26 college students interviewed did so. Although approximately a quarter of the 26 college students were working full-time (and therefore might have found it difficult to complete a placement as part of their course), this fact does not entirely explain the institutional difference in work placement completion. As such, this difference may be partially due to the varying amounts of formalised career development opportunities available to bachelor's degree students at universities versus colleges.

Work placements were one of the key ingredients of labour market success for university graduates. Three out of the four university students who completed placements obtained their first jobs after graduation as a direct or indirect result of these opportunities. The one university student who completed a placement but did not get a job as a result still found the experience invaluable in helping him obtain the position he did get. Conversely, the university student who did not complete a placement (despite applying for many) struggled to find a job relative to his peers who had done so. After he graduated, he earned the lowest salary of all the graduates (including both university and college graduates) interviewed. This pattern of outcomes indicates the potential value of a work placement in helping students obtain full-time employment after graduation.

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College students' outcomes were more varied: of the nine who were interviewed after graduating, one moved into a full-time version of a position he already held; two started master's programmes; one stayed in the job she held during her studies; one progressed within his company; and four obtained new jobs at companies where they had never worked. In none of these cases did college students' outcomes result from work placements completed during their HE course.

Another key difference noted when comparing students' expectations and outcomes is that university graduates tended to have higher starting salaries than college graduates, but college graduates had more realistic salary expectations than university graduates. In the questionnaire for this study, the majority of university students expected to earn over £21,000 per year after graduation. However, this figure turned out to be the median salary for university graduates interviewed after graduation. In contrast, most college students surveyed expected to earn less than £21,000 per year, and the median annual salary amongst college graduates interviewees was £18,750. Therefore, although the median salary of college graduates was £2,250 less than university graduates, college students were more accurate in their estimations of their earning potential immediately after graduation. This salary differential is similar to that reported by Parry et al. (2012: 80), who found a gap of £2,500 when comparing the median salaries of graduates with bachelor's degrees in business from colleges compared with universities.

Although students from both types of institution agreed that having a degree helped them obtain employment, most students from both universities and colleges reported not needing their degree in order to actually perform

their jobs. This finding is in line with the more general trend of over-skilling in the UK labour market (Holmes and Mayhew, 2015).¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, students across the board observed themselves using some of the knowledge and skills gained as a result of completing their degree, though they differed on what they described as useful. Whereas university students described how the practical experience gained during their work placements helped them prepare for the workplace, college students discussed their enhanced awareness of how theory can be applied at work. College students also described a wide range of personal outcomes resulting from their course, such as increased confidence and surpassing their own expectations, rather than solely focusing on employment-related outcomes. While university students likely also experienced personal benefits, they tended to focus more on the career-related opportunities given to them at university when discussing key outcomes of their experience.

Exploring college and university students' post-graduation expectations and outcomes uncovers some of the longer-term consequences of the figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) they inhabit as they move through HE. Importantly, access to HE does not grant access to the same types of opportunities for these two groups of students. It is the opportunities they experience as part of their course, such as the chance to complete a work placement, which seem to play the biggest role in determining their future labour market success. Until ensuring access to equal opportunities *during* HE

¹⁵⁷ The term 'over-skilled' describes someone who is not using the skills developed during the course of working towards a qualification (Holmes and Mayhew, 2015: 11). A parallel trend in the UK labour market is over-qualification, which refers to a situation in which a person possesses higher qualifications than required in order to obtain a job (ibid.).

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becomes as important as ensuring access to HE itself, HE in FE students will be unnecessarily excluded from certain types of outcomes.

9 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study aimed to better understand the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of HE in FE bachelor's students and to compare this group with their counterparts at universities. In this chapter, the study's central findings are considered within the context of the figured world conceptual framework, which was introduced in section 4.2. The chapter then describes the key implications for policy and practice that have emerged from this research.

9.1 Not all graduates are created equal

There is no question that policymakers see HE in FE as having a key role to play in widening participation in England (3.1 introduced the contribution of HE in FE to widening participation aims). Through making HE accessible to students who might not otherwise have the opportunity or inclination to consider it as an option, FE colleges are arguably well placed to contribute to this policy aim. However, as argued in 4.2, simply offering more opportunities for students to pursue HE does not guarantee equal outcomes for graduates who were taught at different types of institutions. Nevertheless,

there is an assumption that the 'widening participation student' becomes transformed through the process of participating in undergraduate-level courses into a different kind of subject and participant. By the time the widening participation student graduates with a BA honours degree, it is assumed that they will be reconstituted as the "standard" or "traditional" student (Scott et al., 2014: 96).

Yet when considered against the evidence available, this assumption does not hold true. The findings of this research indicate that although university and college graduates may receive degrees validated by the same type of institution,

their degrees do not necessarily lead to the same type of opportunities. Simply going through the motions of HE is not enough on its own to elicit the outcomes that are presumed to result from completing a bachelor's degree course.

This statement of course begs the question as to why this is the case. Utilising this study's conceptual framework, the answer to this question could be found in exploring how college students are inducted to the figured world of HE. As introduced in 4.2, Holland et al. (1998: 52) describe a figured world as

a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents...who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state...as moved by a specific set of forces.

Figured worlds can be compared with the imaginary worlds created by children when they play (Holland et al., 1998: 49-50). In essence, they are abstract communities that manifest themselves through interaction between people and objects in the physical world.

As figured worlds, HE and FE do not necessarily give significance to the same agents, acts and forces (to use terminology from Holland et al., 1998: 52). For example, professors (agents), research (act) and knowledge production (force) are all considered to be significant within HE, whereas college principals (agents), completing vocational qualifications (act) and inspection outcomes (force) are significant within FE. Although these groupings are somewhat stereotypical and in many ways oversimplify the more nuanced differences between HE and FE, there is some truth in the underlying principle that each world plays by different rules. More explicitly, these figured worlds and the institutions aligned with each of them (universities with HE and

colleges with FE) are bound to different value systems. As a consequence, attempting to establish a micro-version of the figured world of HE within an institution governed by the agents, acts and forces of the figured world of FE causes a clash of values. Furthermore, the 'differentiation [between HE and FE] is maintained as [they] come into contact with each other' (Hernes, 2004: 11). As a result, the presence of HE within an FE context can cause these two worlds to pull apart from each other rather than blend together.

Just as figured worlds themselves change, so do the people within them. In fact, these worlds 'provide the loci in which people fashion senses of self—that is, develop identities' (Holland et al., 1998: 60). As such, there is a two-way relationship between figured worlds and the individuals within them: the worlds are constructed by people and then play a role in constructing people's identities. Although

[t]hese understandings—these identities—are unstable, especially as people are first inducted to a figured world...[they] constitute an enduring and significant aspect of history-in-person, history that is brought to current situations. They are a pivotal element of the perspective that persons bring to the construal of new activities and even new figured worlds' (Holland et al., 1998: 65).

For this reason, being part of a particular figured world can have a lasting effect on an individual's identity.

Conceptualising HE and FE as figured worlds, therefore, allows exploration of how HE in FE students' identities develop as they move through bachelor's degree courses to become graduates. Referring back to Winter and Dismore's (2010: 266) research mentioned in 3.2.1.2, 'integration into the [academic] culture often begins at the [college] and...this [is] important in developing an authentic identity as a *university* student'. Thus, through

exploring identity development within different types of institution, it is possible to see what it is about HE in FE that causes these graduates to be different, if at all, from university graduates as they enter the labour market.

For students pursuing a top-up year in a college environment, their positioning means they are trying to understand and participate in one figured world (HE) while mostly existing within another (FE); thus, they are essentially caught between the two. Understandably, this situation has consequences for college students throughout their journeys into and out of HE. In particular, the fact that these students are neither fully part of one world nor entirely part of the other contributes to the sense of insecurity that many of them exhibit as they enter the labour market after graduation.

The roots of this uncertainty are evident even before students enter HE. In contrast with the sense of destiny that many university students feel about going to HE, many college students are either pushed, pulled or fall into HE as a result of someone else's influence (an idea explored in 6.2). Even for those college students who make an active decision to pursue HE, they are often constrained in terms of which institution they can attend (6.3 described the issue of constraints in making decisions about HE). For both groups, the fact that these students are going to college means that they are *not* going to university. As Robinson (2012: 466) found in her study of foundation degree students,

whilst HE in FE students may decide to join the flow of students into HE, they are aware of the limitations of their position in the HE wider, and increasingly differentiated, landscape and the restrictions of entry to career trajectories compared to their counterparts who enter elite universities.

In this study, this distinction emerged repeatedly in students' decision-making stories, manifesting in tales of why students felt they *could not* go to university rather than why they *did* go to college. Esmond (2012: 356) found similar themes amongst part-time mature HE in FE students, whose stories of 'their "failure" to go to HE at 18 may be seen as "compensatory" narratives'. Thus the dividing line between these two types of institution, and between the figured world each represents, is drawn early on in college students' experiences: going to college is seen as a 'negative' choice, even before students choose it. The opposite narrative—that going to university means *not* going to college—did not hold the same amount of power in the identity development of university students; they did not readily define themselves by where they did not go, at least in terms of type of institution. As a result, compared with university students, college students begin their HE experience from a position of being 'outsiders' of sorts.

Following their decision to enter college, students are then later exposed to how the boundaries between the figured worlds of HE and FE are dealt with in their particular institution. College students' experiences are inevitably shaped by how their institution manages (or does not manage) these boundaries. At the colleges in this study, the overwhelming proportion of FE students relative to HE students meant that the facilities and services available were largely designed for FE students, creating a distinctly FE environment within the college. In Barth's (1969: 10) anthropological terms, the 'cultural differences [between FE and HE] can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence'. As such, despite sharing many of the same physical spaces, HE students often found themselves in a marginal position with their

institutions, not really 'belonging' in the sense that the FE students did, and making it clear that they were not part of that figured world. At the same time, they were also reminded in various ways that they were not university students, and therefore not 'proper' members of the figured world of HE either. There were day-to-day aspects to this positioning, such as having some tutors who used an 'FE style' in their teaching, and larger, more symbolic aspects, like the fact that college students' degree certificates included both their college's and partner university's names. As a result, college students were subjected to almost non-existent (though ever present) boundaries within their own institutions, and seemingly strict boundaries between their college and partner university. In both cases, they were located on the periphery of a larger community, much like HE in FE itself exists within the overlap between sectors rather than at the centre of its own.

At first glance, it could seem like the lack of fully belonging to FE or HE is part of what creates the close bond between students and tutors that was observed in the cohorts in this study. Without having a pre-existing figured world in which they fit, those involved with HE in FE can establish their own. However, while this strategy may work for the first stage of students' HE in FE experience, it can lead to issues when students later reach their top-up year. Section 3.2.1.2 for instance, described the difficulties encountered by students who completed a foundation degree (or similar qualification) at a college prior to pursuing their top-up year at a university. Among others, these difficulties include developing a more independent learning style and adjusting to being part of a larger student cohort. In addition to the practical challenges of adjusting to a new institution, these students also faced issues related to

moving from the figured world of their HE in FE cohort to that of their new HE-focused institution.

Although they did not change institutions, students in this research also considered how their experience at bachelor's degree level differed from that of their previous HE qualifications. Most notably, students expressed surprise at how important the knowledge needed to 'do' HE, such as how to use academic referencing and integrate theory when thinking and writing, became once they reached their top-up year. While university students were taught these tools and others in the 'cultural toolkit' (Bruner, 1996) of HE from day one of their bachelor's degree experience, most HE in FE students did not feel they really mattered until level 6. This feeling was not based on their sense of what was relevant to their needs but rather rooted in what they felt their tutors emphasised. The sudden importance of these academic tools and others at bachelor's degree level supports the idea that completing a degree grants access to knowledge (Wheelahan, 2010) and skills that remain relatively unknown to, or at least mostly unused by, students leading up to this level. As such, the move to bachelor's degree level can be conceptualised as a 'change of state' (Holland et al., 1998: 52) intended to induct students into the figured world of HE.

For college students, this change of state—the transition to bachelor's degree level—represents

a transformation of their identities...and it affects how they view and act in the world. It requires not only a particular understanding of the world but [also] a new understanding of their selves and their lives and a reinterpretation of their own pasts. They enter, or rather are recruited to, a new figured world, a new frame of understanding (Holland et al., 1998: 66).

Given the stories students recounted about the marked difference between their experience before and after beginning their top-up year, this transition point is clearly a very important one within the HE in FE context; it is arguably the point at which students begin moving quickly towards becoming HE graduates. However, they are notably undergoing this transition at a fast pace (usually just within their top-up year) within an environment not necessarily intended to support the development of an HE graduate identity. The colleges these students attend are charged with the responsibility of inducting students into a world in which university students already have three (if not four) years of experience, placing a substantial amount of pressure on both colleges and their students. This arrangement explains to some extent why this transition point can be such a stressful one for everyone concerned (described in section 3.2.1.2).

A related issue is that there were clear differences in the opportunities available to these two groups of students. Most notably, the college students in this study were less likely than the university students to have completed a work placement as part of their course. For the university students, undertaking a placement turned out to be one of the most (if not the single most) important factors working in their favour when it came to finding a job after graduation (discussed in 8.3). Therefore, this difference in opportunity created a clear chasm between these two groups of students in terms of their employment outcomes. In general, the limited amount of targeted careers advice and guidance received by college students throughout their course contributed to a lack of confidence in how well prepared they were to enter the labour market.

In explaining how identities are developed through figured worlds, Holland et al. (1998: 60) claim that

[i]dentities form in these figured worlds through day-to-day activities undertaken in their name. Neophytes are recruited into and gain perspective on such practices and come to identify themselves as actors of more or less influence, more or less privilege, and more or less power in these worlds.

Applying this perspective to the journey of HE in FE students in this study, it becomes clear why they expressed a level of insecurity and uncertainty about their future that was not shared by the university students. From even before they entered HE and throughout their degree courses, university students experienced a sense of belonging that was unavailable to the college students. Those at universities saw their pursuit of HE as inevitable and studied within an environment designed to train them in understanding what HE is and how it works. By the time they graduated, they had little reason to doubt who they were and what they had to offer employers.

In contrast, the college students began their journeys with a greater degree of apprehension; many of them were pushed into HE by external forces or pulled into it when they did not know what else to do. From the beginning of their experiences, those who did not actively choose college often described it as second best (compared with university)—even if their choice was limited to pursuing HE in FE or no HE at all. During their courses, they learned how to ‘do’ HE and ‘be’ HE students in an environment intended for a different type of student—one with very different needs and aspirations. Whereas university students had the entirety of their degree to adjust to the inner workings of the figured world of HE, college students were thrust into learning the ins and outs of HE within the space of a year, and in institutions that lacked the resources to

offer them the same experience and opportunities as university students. In short, the college students simply did not have the time or support needed in order to get from where they started to where the university students ended up in terms of confidence about their future. In principle, they undertook a similar transition from outside to inside the figured world of HE; however, in practice, they ended up in different places in terms of their identity as graduates and the types of opportunities available to them as a result of their HE experience.

9.2 Implications for HE in FE policy and practice

This study's findings lead to two implications for HE in FE policy and practice. First, if increasing access and widening participation are to remain goals for the future development of HE in England, then colleges cannot be expected to compete with universities for students. In *Students at the heart of the system*, the White Paper introduced in 1.2, BIS (2011: 47) envisaged 'a diverse, competitive system that can offer different types of higher education so that students can choose freely between a wide range of providers'. However, while there are a small number of examples in this research of students who could go to university choosing to go college instead (see the examples in 6.3.4), these are a minority of cases. Consequently, the existence of HE in FE does offer more choice, but not necessarily to all students. Therefore, the idea that colleges can or should actively compete with universities for students is flawed. In communities or regions where local institutions do compete for students, policy encouraging this competition actually makes it more difficult for colleges to offer HE due to their reliance (at least for now) on university partners to validate their qualifications. While there is no question that the existence of HE

in FE provides access opportunities to students who might not be likely to go to HE at a university, encouraging both increasing access and a competitive market are at cross purposes.

Moreover, this situation is not one that can be resolved simply by making it easier for colleges to award their own degrees and/or obtain the university title, both of which are fundamental reforms proposed by the 2015 Green Paper (BIS, 2015). Colleges as institutions will continue to face similar challenges to those they encounter now, and they will likely continue to attract similar students. Therefore, making them appear more like universities will not instantly make them behave more like universities (just like students completing a bachelor's degree in a college will not instantly make them more like their university counterparts, as pointed out in 9.1 above).

The second implication, which is related to the first, is to do with partnerships between colleges and universities. While students seem to value being able to use their partner university's name when applying for jobs, the extent to which they benefit from this partnership *during* their course is questionable. In actual fact, students' experiences are largely shaped by the environment of their particular college, meaning they rely heavily upon what their college offers during their HE experience. If maintaining standards at bachelor's degree level across different HE providers is a concern, then colleges need additional support in order to enhance what they can provide. This gap between the extensiveness of services and resources for HE students at colleges versus universities is a prime example of how the inequality present amongst different types of institutions can filter down to the student level and affect

their experiences. This issue, again, is not one that will be solved by colleges being called 'universities' or being allowed to validate bachelor's degrees.

The question of whether colleges should be given the power to award the bachelor's degree is one without a straightforward answer. In the aforementioned White Paper, BIS (2011: 24) claimed that 'the forces of competition [would] replace the burdens of bureaucracy in driving up the quality of the academic experience'. However, promoting competition appears to have increased, rather than decreased, the 'burdens of bureaucracy'. Regardless of how their HE provision is funded or validated, offering HE places a clear administrative burden on colleges (Ertl and Allen, 2014: 312-315). This burden is further compounded by the complex and unstable nature of working in the aforementioned partnerships, in which 'either party can withdraw or seek to renegotiate the arrangement' (BIS, 2011: 47). Given this situation, it could be argued that having the ability to offer bachelor's degrees without needing university partners could ease the worries of colleges in maintaining such relationships.

Yet for many students, the ability to attend college and still graduate with a university degree is a key selling point of HE in FE. Therefore, there is a possibility that without partnerships, fewer students may decide to do their top-up year and complete a bachelor's degree. Since many students choose to pursue a level 5 qualification, such as a foundation degree, partially because they can eventually complete a bachelor's degree (Greenbank, 2010: 58), this change at the top-up year level could have knock-on effects on participation rates for other HE in FE qualifications. These potential decreases would then have substantial implications for efforts to widen participation and increase

access. These issues will be considered in more depth in the next and final chapter.

10 CONCLUSION: GOING HIGHER, GOING FURTHER?

A few months prior to beginning fieldwork for this study, I presented my initial ideas and research questions at a small conference. Following my presentation, an audience member remarked that due to the tumultuous nature of HE in FE policy, this study's findings would likely be historical before this thesis was even written. Indeed, the policy context and landscape of HE in FE in England changes so frequently that it can be difficult for research about it to remain current. For instance, since embarking on this research in 2011, the number of colleges directly funded by HEFCE has increased from 124 to 214 (see Table 2.1 on page 39 for further data on the numbers of institutions directly funded by HEFCE) and the moratorium on which institutions can apply for degree-awarding powers has been lifted (BIS, 2015: 43, point 5). These two changes alone mean that HE in FE provision in England looks different now than it did when this research began. With ever-higher numbers of FE colleges receiving direct funding from HEFCE and the involvement of universities in higher apprenticeships and other vocationally orientated qualifications, the overlap between the HE and FE sectors and their institutions continues to be a reality of tertiary education provision in England. The line between what colleges offer and what universities offer is, if anything, even blurrier than it has been in the past. In other words, 'a more traditional typology of institutions...has been radically altered' and 'the truth is that we are all hybrids' (Watson, 2015: 560).

Nevertheless, the core areas explored in this thesis—bachelor's students' decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes across different types of

institutions—remain of interest regardless of how the environment in which they are investigated changes. Therefore, although the findings of this study might be historical in the sense that they emerged from students who graduated in 2013, the issues they raise remain pertinent.

10.1 Summary of key contributions

As one of very few studies (the other most relevant being Parry, Davies and Williams, 2004) to include empirically-based direct comparisons of HE in FE with HE in universities, this study offers valuable insight into the differences between students' journeys through HE at these different types of institution.¹⁵⁸ Through comparisons with previous research (ibid.), this study also demonstrates that many of the conclusions drawn over a decade ago about how HE in FE contrasts with HE in universities over remain true in 2016 (despite the many policy proposals and decisions published since 2004).

The comparative work conducted by Parry, Davies and Williams (2004: 23) led to four main conclusions: first, 'cross-sector comparisons, whatever their purposes, are precarious and have become harder to make in recent years' (ibid.). Second, while 'many of the claims [made by HE in FE] to difference and distinctiveness' might be true, they are 'fragile' and 'appeal to the values, approaches and purposes that define "the FE ethos"' (ibid.). In other words, they are 'unrelated to the academic division of labour in higher education' (ibid.). Third, '[c]olleges sustain a size and intimacy that, in many respects, run counter to the scales and efficiencies demanded of mass higher education' and

¹⁵⁸ In contrast to this study's methodology, Parry, Davies and Williams (2004: 4) surveyed and interviewed HE coordinators at colleges and their partner universities in addition to holding focus groups with students pursuing a range of HE in FE qualifications.

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[t]here is a strength and a vulnerability in this situation' (ibid.). Finally, there is evidence to suggest 'that HE in FE is a hybrid: in some ways more akin to further education and in other respects more like higher education' (ibid.).

The findings of this study arguably support all of these conclusions. It is clear that making comparisons across sectors remains difficult, despite relatively recent improvements made in the data available about HE in FE provision. Although there are benefits students receive by nature of being in a college environment, there are also consequences to pursuing HE in an FE space. Therefore, the selling points of FE that make sense for vocational qualifications do not necessarily transpose well into HE provision. Likewise, for colleges themselves, the size of their HE population can be both a positive and a negative. Finally, there is certainly evidence that HE in FE provision can be a hybrid. However, while this characteristic can be a positive in some respects, it also means that HE in FE does not necessarily provide the 'HE experience' that some students expect.

In addition to building on these previous findings, this study's key contributions are two-fold. First, the findings provide evidence for the fact that most college students in England (at least those represented here) do not actively choose to go to a college over a university. For many of them, the bigger decision is not *where* to go for HE but *whether* to go to HE. This point explains to some extent why HE in FE might serve to widen participation but not necessarily increase competition between institutions. Although this research is not the first to discover this particular difference between HE students at universities and colleges (6.3 mentions other studies with similar findings), it is a point worth repeating in light of the on-going political

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aspiration (promoted in both the 2011 White Paper, BIS, 2011, and the 2015 Green Paper, BIS, 2015) for student choice to shape the HE system in England.

The evidence presented here suggests that the notion of institutional choice is a misnomer in the college student decision-making process. As such, it cannot be relied upon to help determine which institutions, and especially which HE in FE providers, offer the best student experience. However, it is questionable whether more choice is what these particular students really need or want. The majority of those who participated in this study did not wish they had gone to a different college or another type of institution; they simply wanted certain aspects of the HE offered by their college to be better. If these students were truly 'at the heart of the system', the focus of policy reforms would be on improving what they have access to already, rather than expanding the range of options available to them.

Second, this study's findings demonstrate that undertaking HE in FE does not make college and university graduates the same, even if they all graduate with university degrees. Both types of institution attract and recruit different students, and the college experience is not identical to the university experience: each has its own benefits and consequences. Nevertheless, there are some differences in the student experience at each that have a clear influence on students' future careers, such as the opportunity many university students have to apply for and complete a formal work placement during their course. It is these additional opportunities, rather than simply having a university-validated degree, which appear to make a difference when it comes to students' labour market outcomes. This finding is supported by statistical research using Futuretrack survey data (McCulloch, 2013). Through running a

series of regression analyses, McCulloch (ibid., p. 90) found that ‘work experience had an effect on labour market outcomes that was at least partly independent of the respondent’s background characteristics’. Moreover, ‘not undertaking any form of work experience while studying was associated with the least positive labour market outcomes’ (ibid.). Therefore unless college students are afforded such opportunities, it is unlikely that their university-validated degree will help them compete with students who have both this qualification and relevant experience.

10.2 The limitations of this study

Researching students’ journeys through bachelor’s degree courses in colleges has not been without its challenges. In addition to the temporal and financial constraints of undertaking doctoral research (introduced in 4.3.4.3), conducting research about HE in FE brought its own unique complications (3.1 described some of the challenges with researching this area). The contentious nature of partnership arrangements during the recruitment period together with the lack of comprehensive data about HE in FE providers led to difficulties in finding eligible institutions with partners willing to participate in the study.

The information needed in order to understand which institutions are involved in HE in FE and the nature of their involvement has since improved with the introduction of HEFCE’s register of HE providers (HEFCE, 2015d). Among other features, this register allows users to filter searches to only include providers in the category of ‘an FE or sixth form college that delivers HE’ (HEFCE, 2015d); a notable improvement compared to the previous complexity involved in compiling such lists. As of 2012, without access to such

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centralised data, the difficulties encountered in recruiting institutions resulted in a small sample of institutions that were not in partnership with each other for the purposes of offering bachelor's degrees in business.¹⁵⁹ In other words, the universities that participated did not validate the bachelor's degrees in business for the FE institutions that were included.

When I began recruiting institutions, I thought that the advantage of including institutions in partnership would have been the ability to assess how students' experiences compared between directly funded and indirectly funded partners. From experience, I now am not convinced that the differences would have been that striking. Instead, I think more can be learned about the student experience from looking at how particular institutions manage their relationships with partners (whether those partners are directly or indirectly funded) rather than focusing on different types of partnership arrangements.

In addition to the challenge of recruiting institutions, it also proved difficult to recruit university students. With small cohort sizes and course leaders willing to personally recruit their students, once a college was on board, carrying out the interviews and questionnaire for this study was relatively straightforward. In contrast, recruiting university participants required communicating with and/or obtaining approval from numerous administrators before being able to advertise the study. When the study was advertised, it was done so via email rather than in person, making the approach more impersonal than that used at the colleges. The university administrators did not seem less interested than the college course leaders in helping, but simply not as directly connected to the students. Viewing the situation in this way, it is

¹⁵⁹ It is possible that the institutions involved were in partnership for other courses.

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understandable why there would be more college student participants than university ones, even given the limited number of business bachelor's students there are at colleges overall. Notwithstanding this explanation, the small sample size of university students (both for the interviews and questionnaire) limited the comparisons that could be made across types of institution, in addition to restricting how generalisable this study's findings are to the wider university student population.

The generalisability of the findings is also limited by the fact that the students included did not graduate with degrees from the *same* university. It is likely that more comparability would have been possible if the students included had graduated with the same degree from different institutions. In addition, the sample only included students who progressed to top-up years within colleges, and none who moved to universities for their final year. Therefore, students in this study did not have to go through the institutional transition faced by many other HE in FE students who pursue top-up years (3.2.1.2 reviewed studies about the transition to bachelor's degree level education). As a consequence, findings about this study's sample are not generalisable across all HE in FE bachelor's students.

The data collected were also somewhat limited by using both interviews and a questionnaire as research instruments. While using both provided triangulated data, this choice also added logistical complexity to the data collection process, which restricted the time available to recruit more institutions and/or participants. Furthermore, the way in which the questionnaire was distributed meant that the colleges had very high response

rates relative to the universities (5.1.4.2 described the process of carrying out the questionnaire).

10.3 Implications for future research

While the findings of this study have contributed to our knowledge about HE in FE, they have also raised additional questions to be considered for future research in three areas. First, how (if at all) would granting degree-awarding powers to colleges change students' decisions about HE? There is clear evidence in this research that students value the opportunity to pursue a university-validated degree in a college environment (6.3.3 gave examples of students describing why they value their connection with a university). However, new policy proposals suggest that it might be easier in the future for non-university HE providers like colleges to award bachelor's degrees (BIS, 2015). There is an obvious tension here between what HE in FE students in both this study and others (e.g. Greenbank, 2010) claim to value (the benefits of going to college *and* the potential benefits of a university-validated degree) and what such policy changes would provide (the benefits of going to college *less* the potential benefits of a university-validated degree).

It is not yet certain if (and if so, how) allowing colleges to award their own degrees would affect students' decision-making: would they still choose to go to HE if they would graduate with a college-awarded degree rather than one from a university? Some of the responses given by student in this study suggest the answer could be no. At its heart, this question is really about the extent to which the word 'university' and what it stands for matters to prospective students who cannot, for whatever reason, go to a university and their potential

employers. Although the proposed policy changes are also open to the possibility that colleges (and other ‘alternative providers’) could more easily obtain the university title in the future, it remains to be determined which restrictions may be implemented to prevent all non-university institutions from applying. Despite the 2015 Green Paper claiming to ‘want to introduce access to the university title for a wider range of providers’ (BIS, 2015: 48), it is difficult to imagine a future in which any HE provider in England could be called a university. If this were to be the case, the two-sector structure of HE and FE might need to be rethought. This point chimes with an on-going discussion in the literature about ‘post-institutional HE’. As Watson (2015: 561) argues,

[i]n policy terms, if we want a system of post-compulsory education with better prospects for achieving our social, economic and cultural goals, we are going to have to take lifelong learning more seriously, and that means a post-institutional future for post-compulsory education.

However, rather than a ‘post-institutional future’, it seems we are instead heading in some ways towards a mono-institutional future, where institutions are encouraged to appear similar on the surface despite being very different underneath. The consequences of such a shift remain to be seen.

The second area for future research, which is linked to the first, is related to employers. As of 2016, very little is known about whether employers prefer recruiting bachelor’s degree graduates who were taught at universities rather than colleges (3.2.4 discusses the limited data which is available about this issue).¹⁶⁰ Although there is some evidence that big, private sector firms prefer university graduates to college-taught graduates (Parry et al., 2012: 165),

¹⁶⁰ There is, however, evidence that some companies prefer recruiting employees from what are internationally considered to be ‘elite’ universities (either by reputation or by ranking) rather than universities in general (e.g. Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011: 93-94).

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the data available about this issue are too limited to be conclusive. However, at least some students (and, potentially, their institutions) seem convinced that the type of institution named on a degree does make a difference to graduates' employment outcomes (8.2.6 discussed students' views on this topic). Whether the location of teaching matters to employers or not, the findings of such a study would have implications for students' decision-making. If the university title does make a difference, then students may be even more concerned about ensuring they obtain a university-validated qualification if they choose to pursue a bachelor's degree. It would also potentially make it even more important to provide students at colleges (especially those without the university title) with relevant work-based learning (either through work placements or internships) during their course in order to be competitive in the labour market.

Finally, more research is needed in the area of careers advice and guidance for bachelor's students at colleges, especially for mature students looking to change their career, and younger students with limited or no work experience. The students from these two groups in this study clearly expressed the view that they were not receiving the careers support they expected or needed. However, very little is known about the careers-related services available to HE students in colleges and how these services compare to what is offered to undergraduates in universities. Although this study explored some of the differences, more research in this area could provide a more in-depth comparison.

10.4 Going higher, going further?

Despite the overlap between the English FE and HE sectors in terms of HE provision, it is clear these two types of education are still treated as separate. In other words, the ‘enormous gulf’ that is perceived to exist between these two types of education (a metaphor introduced in 1.1) persists regardless of the extent to which they interact in the space between the two sectors. The consequences of this metaphor for HE in FE provision are evident at every level, from how policy controls which institutions can award degrees through to how students perceive the value of their college-taught degree as they enter the labour market. Indeed, the influence of this gulf on HE in FE students’ decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes cannot be underestimated.

The division between FE and HE positions HE in FE students on the outskirts of the HE sector from the moment they make the decision to pursue their degree at a college. Although this positioning is beyond their control, it situates them in some respects as outsiders from before they even enter HE. During their HE experience, and particularly during their top-up year, students like those in this study then exist on the edges of their institutions—they are not fully part of the FE world at their college, nor are they fully part of the HE world at their partner university. This situation then influences students’ post-graduation expectations as their lack of confidence in how going to HE at college is perceived by others contributes to a sense of insecurity about what employers will think of them as job applicants. These feelings can then lead them to use their partner university’s name when applying for jobs, despite having little interaction with the university throughout their course. The key difference between this narrative about a college student’s journey through HE

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and that experienced by university students is that the overarching divide between HE and FE does not loom large for the latter group as they move through HE.

It is worth considering the fact that this narrative might not reflect the experience of students at larger HE in FE providers (who may go to a designated HE or university centre within their college). However, Parry et al. (2012: 65) explain that even at ‘the “mixed economy” colleges where higher education was a significant share of the total activity’, they found there was ‘always a minority of student numbers’ on HE courses. Therefore, the positioning described above is likely a reality for many HE in FE students, regardless of the size of their particular college’s HE provision.

One of the biggest challenges faced in trying to resolve these issues is that many of the assumptions made in policy about HE in FE and its role in bachelor’s degree provision are not accurate. Two of these assumptions are particularly apt for the conclusions of this study. First, what holds true about colleges in other areas of their provision does not necessarily translate to their HE courses. For example, though a college will likely have pre-established relationships with employers, those employers might not be interested in expanding their relationship to include offering work placements to bachelor’s degree students. Truly implementing HE in a college environment requires more than simply giving these institutions the ability to offer HE qualifications. Second, widening participation does not mean that upward social mobility instantly becomes a reality for more graduates (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007). Although there is no doubt that pursuing a bachelor’s degree in a college is a real opportunity for students who cannot, for whatever reason, go to a

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university, there are no guarantees as to what their outcomes will be. If all HE students, regardless of the type of institution they attend, are to have access to a similar range of opportunities, much more thought must be given to what it is about going higher that can help students go further when they graduate. Enhancing (rather than just increasing) the HE provision that is available is essential for participation to be widened in the truest sense.

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12 APPENDICES

12.1 Appendix A: Methodology materials

12.1.1 CUREC application

The section originally presented here cannot currently be made freely available via ORA.

12.1.2 Coding of expert interviews

Expert 1: Current FEC assistant vice principal

Expert 2: Former FEC principal

Expert 3: Former HE in FE policy officer

Expert 4: Current academic

Expert 5: Current FEC principal

Expert 6: Former FEC principal

Expert 7: Current HE policy officer

Expert 8: Current FE policy officer

12.1.3 Interview schedules

12.1.3.1 Example of expert interview schedule

Section 1: Current and former employment information

1. Have you worked in any other further or higher education institutions?
If so, what were your roles at those institutions?
2. How long have you worked at your current institution?
3. Have you always been in this role or have you held other roles at this institution?
4. What are your key responsibilities as [insert job title]?

Section 2: HE in FE courses

5. When did this institution start offering HE courses?
6. Why did this institution start offering HE courses?
7. Which HE qualifications are offered at this institution? In which subjects?
8. Which HE courses have the most students and which have the least?
Why are those courses popular/unpopular?
9. How are the HE courses structured?
10. How are the HE courses funded?
11. How is the quality of the HE courses assessed?

Section 3: HE in FE students

12. How many HE students are at this institution? What percentage is this of the total student body?
13. What is the HE student body like in terms of age; attendance status (FT or PT); origin (home, EU, or international); and prior attainment?
14. What progression opportunities (in terms of employment or further study) are available to HE students? Are any specific opportunities available due to the location of the college and its proximity to particular institutions or industries?
15. What are the benefits of being an HE student at this institution? What does this institution offer its HE students which other similar institutions might not?

Section 4: HE in FE staff

16. Are there administrative and teaching staff particularly responsible for the delivery of HE?
17. What are the HE teaching staff like in terms of their background and their responsibilities at this institution? Do they teach both HE and FE courses?
18. What are the training requirements for HE teaching staff?

Section 5: Future projections and recommendations

19. What is this institution's strategic vision for the future HE? How is the college planning to develop its HE programmes in the next 3-5 years?
20. What are the key challenges facing this institution in attempting to achieve its vision? Why are those the key challenges?
21. Are there any individuals at this institution or elsewhere whom you would recommend speaking to?
22. Is there anything I didn't cover which you would like to comment on or discuss?

12.1.3.2 Example of pre-graduation interview schedule

Section 1: Introduction to research and interview

1. *Introduction:* JA will explain the research and the structure and purpose of the interview. JA will provide the participant with an information sheet about the research and a consent form to sign. JA will give the participant time to review the information sheet and consent form while she reviews their background information sheet.

Section 2: Current course

2. *Decision-making*
 - a. Could you tell me how you decided to do this course?
 - i. Did any of your family members attend HE before you?
 - ii. (If not answered by question a.) What factors did you consider when making the decision to do this course?
 - iii. What was the most important factor for you when deciding to do this course?
 - iv. What are the main benefits of doing this course?
 - v. Will you have debt to pay off as a result of this course? If so, how long do you expect it to take you to pay it off?
 - vi. Are you confident in your ability to pay this debt off by then?
 - b. How did you choose business as your subject?
 - i. (If not answered by question a.) What factors did you consider when making the decision choose business?
 - ii. What was the most important factor for you when deciding to choose business?
 - iii. What are the main benefits of choosing business?
 - c. How did you choose this institution?
 - i. (If not answered by question a.) What factors did you consider when making the decision to choose this institution?
 - ii. What was the most important factor for you when deciding to choose this institution?
 - iii. What are the main benefits of choosing this institution?
 - iv. Did you consider going to any other institutions?
3. *Structure*
 - a. **Using handbook:** What do you think of how this course is structured?
 - i. Would you change anything about the structure?
 - ii. Would you change anything about the modules included?

- b. How has the workload been?
 - i. Would you change anything about the workload?
 - ii. Would you change anything about the types of assignments you have been asked to do?
- c. What is your relationship with your lecturers like?

4. *Support*

- a. What kind of support is available to students on your course? Academic support? Welfare support? Careers support?
- b. Is there any kind of support needed which you feel is not provided?

5. *Satisfaction*

- a. How have you found the course? Has it met your expectations?
- b. How have you found doing business? Has it met your expectations?
- c. How have you found this institution? Has it met your expectations?
- d. What are the biggest positives and negatives of this course/institution?
- e. What would you change about this course/institution, if anything?
- f. Would you recommend this course/institution to others?

Section 3: Student life

- 6. *Average week: JA will use background information sheet to pick out relevant points to raise here.* Given these circumstances, what is your schedule like each week? How do you balance all of these demands on your time?
 - a. Current employment
 - i. **If student is working:** Is your job/internship related to your course?
 - ii. If not, why did you choose to work while on this course?
 - b. Attendance status
 - i. Could you have opted to attend (full-time/part-time)?
 - ii. If so, why did you choose to attend (full-time/part-time)?
 - c. Where the student lives during term-time
 - i. Why did you choose to live (at the institution/away from the institution)?
 - ii. **If student does not live at institution:** How often do you come to the institution during the week?
 - d. Hours per week in lectures/seminars and private study
 - i. Do you feel you have enough time during the week to spend on coursework?
 - ii. If not, what do you feel prevents you from having enough time?

Section 4: Career and future projections

7. *Work experience*

- a. I noticed on your sheet that you (are currently working X hours a week/do not currently have a job). Could you please (tell me about your current job/tell me about any work experience you have)?
- b. **If student currently has a job:** Do you have any other former work experience? If so, could you tell me about it?
- c. Have you completed any internships or work placements during your course? If so, what were they?
- d. Has your course required you to contact local employers? If so, did your institution help you get in touch with them? Did you end up building a relationship with the local employer(s)?
- e. During your course, have you thought about what kind of job you might want afterwards? Have you done anything to explore what doing this job might be like?

8. *Aspirations*

- a. What would you like to do after completing your course? Has this changed during your course? If yes, in what way?
- b. How did you decide that this is what you would like to do?
- c. Have you already started to explore and/or make arrangements to do this?
- d. Do you think your qualification will help you with this?
- e. What do you expect to earn?

9. *Future*

- a. Assuming all goes according to plan, where would you like to be in 5 years' time?

Section 5: Conclusion and follow-up arrangements

10. *Conclusion:* JA will thank interviewee for their participation.

- a. Is there anything I did not cover which you would like to comment on or discuss?
- b. After I review our interview today, I will contact you if I have any questions. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or further comments about what we discussed today.
- c. With your permission, I would like to contact you again about three months after you graduate to arrange a follow-up interview and see what you are doing. Could you please tell me what is the best way to contact you?

12.1.3.3 Abbreviated pre-graduation interview schedule

Section 1: Introduction to research and interview

1. *Introduction:* JA will explain the research and the structure and purpose of the interview. JA will ensure the student has read the information sheet and signed a consent form. JA will quickly review the background information sheet.

Section 2: Current course

2. *Decision-making*
 - a. Could you tell me how you decided to do this course?
 - i. What was the most important factor for you when deciding to do this course? (Have any of your family members attended HE before you?)
 - ii. What are the main benefits of doing this course?
 - b. Did you consider going to any other institutions? How did you choose this institution?
 - i. What was the most important factor for you when deciding to choose this institution?
 - ii. What are the main benefits of choosing this institution?
 - c. How did you choose business as your subject?
3. *Structure*
 - a. What do you think of how this course is structured?
 - b. What has the workload been like?
 - c. Have you completed any internships or work placements during your course?
 - d. What is your relationship with your lecturers like?
4. *Support*
 - a. What kind of support is available to students on your course? Academic support? Welfare support? Careers support?
 - b. Is there any kind of support needed which you feel is not provided?
5. *Satisfaction*
 - a. Have the course and institution met your expectations?
 - b. What are the biggest positives and negatives of this course/institution?
 - c. What would you change about this course/institution, if anything?
 - d. Would you recommend this course/institution to others?

Section 3: Student life

6. *Average week*

- a. What is your schedule like each week?
- b. Is your job/internship related to your course? If not, why did you choose to work while on this course?
- c. Do you feel you have enough time during the week to spend on coursework? If not, what do you feel prevents you from having enough time?

Section 4: Career and future projection

7. *Aspirations*

- a. What would you like to do after completing your course?
- b. Do you think your qualification will help you with this?
- c. What do you expect to earn?

8. *Future*

- a. Will you have debt to pay off as a result of this course? If so, how long do you expect it to take you to pay it off?
- b. Assuming all goes according to plan, where would you like to be in 5 years' time?

Section 5: Conclusion and follow-up arrangements

9. *Conclusion:* JA will thank interviewee for their participation.

- a. Anything not covered which you would like to comment on or discuss?
- b. After I review our interview today, I will contact you if I have any questions. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or further comments.
- c. Could I please contact you again about three months after you graduate to arrange a follow-up interview?

12.1.3.4 Post-graduation interview if in employment

Section 1: Introduction to research and interview

1. *Introduction:* JA will explain this stage of the research and the structure and purpose of this particular interview. JA will also remind interviewee about conditions of consent form and ensure interviewee is happy to be recorded.
2. *Present experience*
 - a. Tell me about your life since graduation. I remember you told me that you would like to do **XX**. Is this what you are doing?
 - i. If yes, how are you finding it?
 - ii. If no, what are you doing instead? How are you finding that?
 - b. You also said you hoped to be earning **XX**. Is that your current salary? If no, what is your current salary? How do you feel about your current salary given what your expectations were?

Section 2: Transition to employment

3. *Job search*
 - a. What techniques/strategies/resources did you use when looking for jobs?
 - b. How many jobs did you apply for in the end?
 - c. What kind of support did your former institution provide for finding a job?
 - d. How did you end up finding your current job?
 - e. How long did it take you to find your current job?
 - f. What other offers did you have, if any? To what extent did your degree/institution prepare you for finding a job in the current economic context?
4. *Application process*
 - a. What was the application process like? Looking back, do you wish you had done anything differently? If so, what?
 - b. What criteria were required for this position? Did you need your bachelor's degree in order to apply?
 - c. What do you think were the most important criteria that the company/organisation were looking for when hiring for your position?
 - d. (For college students) When asked where you did your degree, did you give the name of the college, the university, or both? Which name does your degree certificate have on it? (Probe: Specific examples of situations in which college/university name is used.)

5. *Current position*

- a. Is your day-to-day work similar to what you expected?
- b. What are the positives and negatives of your current position?
- c. How well do you feel your studies prepared you for your current position?
- d. How long do you plan to stay in this position?

Section 3: Reflection and career projections

6. *Reflection*

- a. Is there anything you wish you had done during your course to better prepare yourself for this job? If so, what?
- b. Is there anything your institution could have done to better prepare you for this job? If so, what?
- c. Looking back on it, what do you think were the most useful/least useful aspects of the course?

7. *Career projections*

- a. When we last spoke, you told me that in 3-5 years' time you would like to be doing **XX**. Is that still your goal? If not, what is?
- b. What is your ultimate career goal? How confident do you feel that you will achieve this goal?

Section 5: Conclusion and follow-up arrangements

8. *Conclusion: JA will thank interviewee for their participation.*

- a. Is there anything I did not cover which you would like to comment on or discuss?
- b. After I review our interview today, I will contact you if I have any questions. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments.
- c. JA will tell interviewee that they will receive a shopping voucher for their participation.

12.1.3.5 Post-graduation interview if unemployed or in further study

Section 1: Introduction to research and interview

1. *Introduction:* JA will explain this stage of the research and the structure and purpose of this particular interview. JA will also remind interviewee about conditions of consent form and ensure interviewee is happy to be recorded.
2. *Present experience*
 - a. Tell me about your life since graduation. What have you been doing? How are you finding that?
 - b. You also said you hoped to be earning **XX**. Is that your current salary? If no, what is your current salary? How do you feel about your current salary given what your expectations were?

Section 2: Transition to employment/further study

3. *Job/course search*
 - a. What techniques/strategies/resources are you using to look for jobs/did you use to look for courses?
 - b. How many jobs/courses have you applied for so far/did you apply for?
 - c. What kind of support is/did your institution providing/provide to help you find a job/a course?
4. *Application process*
 - a. What are/were the applications like? Looking at the ones you have done so far/did, do you wish you had done anything differently? If so, what?
 - b. What criteria are required for the positions/courses you are applying/applied for? Is/was a bachelor's degree required in order to apply?
 - c. What do you think are the most important criteria that the organisations/institutions are/were looking for in applicants?
 - d. (For college students) When asked where you did your degree, did you give the name of the college, the university, or both? Which name does your degree certificate have on it? (Probe: Specific examples of situations in which college/university name is used.)
5. *Current circumstances*
 - a. How does life after graduation compare to what you expected?
 - b. Have you used anything you learned on your course since you graduated, either in applying for jobs or in pursuing further study?

Section 3: Reflection and career projections

6. *Reflection*

- a. Do you feel that your course prepared you to look for jobs/postgraduate courses?
- b. Is there anything you wish you had done during your course to better prepare yourself for life after graduation? If so, what?
- c. Is there anything your institution could have done to better prepare you for life after graduation/applying for jobs/pursuing further study? If so, what?
- d. Looking back on it, what do you think were the most useful/least useful aspects of the course?

7. *Career projections*

- a. When we last spoke, you told me that in 3-5 years' time you would like to be doing **XX**. Is that still your goal? If not, what is?
- b. What is your ultimate career goal? How confident do you feel that you will achieve this goal?

Section 5: Conclusion and follow-up arrangements

8. *Conclusion: JA will thank interviewee for their participation.*

- a. Is there anything I did not cover which you would like to comment on or discuss?
- b. After I review our interview today, I will contact you if I have any questions. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments.
- c. JA will tell interviewee that they will receive a shopping voucher for their participation.

12.1.3.6 Abbreviated post-graduation interview schedule

1. What have you been doing since graduating in 2013?
2. If you own your own business, have you made any changes to your business as a result of completing a degree course?
3. If you are in further study, what course are you taking and where?
4. If you are in employment (but do not own your own business), what is your current job?
5. What is your current salary range?
 - a. £0-£9,999
 - b. £10,000-£14,999
 - c. £15,000-£20,999
 - d. £21,000-£29,999
 - e. £30,000-£39,999
 - f. More than £40,000
6. What techniques/strategies/resources did you use when looking for jobs and/or further study opportunities?
7. Were you required to have a bachelor's degree in order to apply for your current job/course? If not, what qualifications and/or experience were required?
8. How well do you feel your degree prepared you for your current job/course?
9. Is there anything you wish you had done during your final year to better prepare you for your current job, seeking employment, or further study? If so, what?
10. Is there anything your institution could have done to better prepare you for your current job, seeking employment, or further study? If so, what?
11. Looking back on your degree course now, what do you think were the most useful/least useful aspects of it?
12. What is your ultimate career goal? How confident do you feel that you will achieve this goal?

12.1.4 Questionnaire

**GOING HIGHER:
A questionnaire for business students**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. The study is being conducted by Jennifer Allen, who is a PhD student at the University of Oxford. If you would like to learn more about the study generally, please contact Jennifer at jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk.

This questionnaire will ask questions about why you entered higher education, what your course has been like and what you expect to do after graduation. It should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. I am interested in your personal views and experiences, so there are no right or wrong answers to the questions.

You will not be asked for your name during the course of the questionnaire and any information you provide will remain anonymous to the researcher. All responses will be kept confidential and future reports based on this questionnaire will not name any specific person or institution.

You do not have to take part in this questionnaire if you do not wish to. If you start the questionnaire and decide that you do not want to finish, you do not have to finish. You have the right to withdraw at any stage for any reason. Whether you choose to participate or withdraw will not have any impact on your studies.

If you choose to participate, your answers will be a valuable contribution to this research study. The more participants who take part, the more the findings will accurately represent the experiences of students like you.

Before beginning the questionnaire, please tick below to indicate that you have read and agree to participate in the study as outlined in the information sheet and consent form provided:

☐ I agree to participate in this study.

Please answer the following questions by ticking the boxes or writing in the spaces provided.

Section 1: Background information

1. What is your **age**? _____
2. What is your **gender**? *Please tick ONE box only.*
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Other
3. Which of the following best describes your **ethnic group**? *Please tick ONE box only.*
 - ☐ White
 - ☐ Mixed
 - ☐ Asian or Asian British
 - ☐ Black or Black British
 - ☐ Other (please specify below)

4. What is the postcode of your **permanent home** (e.g. where you live outside of term time)? If you are an international student, please state your home country.

5. Where do you live **during term time**? *Please tick ONE box only.*
 - ☐ Alone in house/flat/lodgings
 - ☐ With parents
 - ☐ With partner/spouse and/or children
 - ☐ With friends/students in rented accommodation (not provided by your university/college)
 - ☐ In college/university-provided accommodation (e.g. halls of residence)
 - ☐ Other (please specify below)

6. Have any of the following members of your family **attended any higher education**? *Please tick ONE box only on each line.*

	Yes	No	Don't know/ Not applicable
Your mother			
Your father			
Your stepmother			
Your stepfather			
A brother/sister			
Partner or spouse			
Another member of your household/immediate family			

7. Which **academic qualifications** did you have prior to starting your current course? *Please tick ALL that apply.*

- ☐ GCSEs
- ☐ AS levels
- ☐ A-levels
- ☐ NVQs
- ☐ BTEC
- ☐ AVCE
- ☐ Higher National Certificate
- ☐ Higher National Diploma
- ☐ Foundation Degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Other (please specify below)

Section 2: Your current course

8. Why did you decide to **enter higher education**? *Please tick ALL that apply.*

- A** ☐ It's the normal thing to do
- B** ☐ I needed a higher education qualification to get ahead
- C** ☐ It was part of my long-term career plans
- D** ☐ My existing qualifications were inadequate to meet my career ambitions
- E** ☐ To help me to get a good job
- F** ☐ I wanted to study the particular subject/course
- G** ☐ I wanted to be a student
- H** ☐ Some/all of my friends were doing so
- I** ☐ My parents/partner encouraged me to apply
- J** ☐ My teachers/lecturer encouraged me to apply
- K** ☐ My employer/someone at my workplace encouraged me to apply
- L** ☐ I was influenced by careers advice or information given at school/college
- M** ☐ I wasn't sure what to do next and it gave me more options
- N** ☐ I thought it would be better than being unemployed
- O** ☐ I wanted to do something useful/different with my life
- P** ☐ To take advantage of the social life such as meeting new people
- Q** ☐ It will give me better opportunities in life
- R** ☐ Other (please specify below)

9. Which **ONE** of these was the **most important reason** when making your decision? *Please write in the LETTER from the list above that corresponds to your most important reason.*

10. Which of the following influenced your **choice of university or college**? *Please tick ALL that apply.*

- A** ☐ Parents/partners or other family members
- B** ☐ Friends
- C** ☐ Teacher(s)
- D** ☐ Students already studying at this institution or on this course
- E** ☐ School or college careers adviser
- F** ☐ The teaching reputation of the university/college or department
- G** ☐ The research reputation of the university/college or department
- H** ☐ Reputation of the institution generally
- I** ☐ The university/college prospectus or website
- J** ☐ Visit to institution
- K** ☐ Location, because I could continue to live at home
- L** ☐ Location, because I wanted to study away from home
- M** ☐ Location, because it is an attractive or interesting place
- N** ☐ It offered the particular course I wanted
- O** ☐ Course fees and/or bursaries available
- P** ☐ Cost of living considerations
- Q** ☐ Availability of suitable accommodation
- R** ☐ Personal reasons (e.g. friends or other members of family were here)
- S** ☐ No particular reasons/don't know
- T** ☐ Other (please specify below)

11. Which **ONE** of these was the **most important influence** when making your decision? *Please write in the LETTER from the list above that corresponds to your most important reason.*

12. Which of the following describes your **current situation**? *Please tick ALL that apply.*

- ☐ I am a student at a further education college
- ☐ I am a student at a university
- ☐ I am employed (full-time, part-time or self-employed)
- ☐ Other (please specify below)

13. What is your **current year of study** on this course? *Please tick ONE box only. Only include years you have been on your current course. Do not include previous courses completed.*

- ☐ First
- ☐ Second
- ☐ Third
- ☐ Fourth
- ☐ Fifth

14. Do you study **full-time or part-time**? Please tick *ONE* box only.

- ☐ Full-time
☐ Part-time

15. What is the **full name** of your university or college? (e.g. University of Cowley or Cowley College)

16. What is the title of your **course and subject**? (e.g. BSc in Business and Management)

17. What were your main reasons for **choosing this course**? Please tick *ALL* that apply.

- A** ☐ Flexible/convenient teaching hours
B ☐ I could fit the course around my existing work commitments
C ☐ I could fit the course around my existing family responsibilities
D ☐ I got good grades in the subject(s) related to this course
E ☐ I am interested in the content of the course
F ☐ I need to complete this course to enter a particular profession/occupation
G ☐ I think it will lead to good employment opportunities in general
H ☐ It will enable me to qualify for another course
I ☐ I was advised that the course would be appropriate for me
J ☐ To help me get on in my present job/career
K ☐ Other (please specify below)

18. Which **ONE** of these was the **most important reason** when making your decision? Please write in the *LETTER* from the list above that corresponds to your most important reason.

19. Do you regard **your course** as...? Please tick *ONE* box only.

- ☐ Vocational (i.e. designed to lead to a specific job)
☐ Non-vocational (i.e. not designed to lead to a specific job)

20. Have you completed a **work placement or internship** as part of your course? Please tick *ONE* box only.

- ☐ Yes, this was required
☐ I have completed a work placement/internship, but it was optional
☐ I could have completed a work placement/internship as part of my course, but I chose not to do so
☐ No, this was not offered as part of my course
☐ Other (please specify below)

21. How many **hours in total each week** (during term time) do you normally spend **attending timetabled lectures, seminars or tutorials related to your course**? If this varies from week to week, please give an average.

22. How many **hours in total each week** (during term time) do you normally spend **studying outside of lectures, seminars or tutorials**? If this varies from week to week, please give an average.

23. Overall, how have you found the **standard of work** required for your course? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ I have to work much harder than I expected.
- ☐ I have to work somewhat harder than I expected.
- ☐ The work is as I expected.
- ☐ I have to work less hard than I expected.
- ☐ I have to work much less hard than I expected.

24. If you were starting again, would you **choose the same course**? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ Yes, definitely
- ☐ Yes, probably
- ☐ I would choose a similar course, but not this one
- ☐ I would choose to study something completely different
- ☐ I would decide not to study at all
- ☐ Don't know

25. If you could **choose something different**, what would you choose and why?

26. How much are your **course fees** per year?

£ _____ per year

27. How are you paying for your **course fees**? Please tick *ALL* that apply.

- A** ☐ Student loan
- B** ☐ Tuition fees grant (if studying part-time)
- C** ☐ Personal savings/investment
- D** ☐ Money I don't have to repay from parents/partner/family
- E** ☐ Informal loan from parents/family and others
- F** ☐ National Health Service bursary/General Social Care Council Family bursary
- G** ☐ Employer financial support
- H** ☐ Work during term-time
- I** ☐ Work during holidays
- J** ☐ Career development loan
- K** ☐ Other forms of borrowing (credit card, bank loans, overdraft)
- L** ☐ College/university bursary
- M** ☐ College/university access to learning fund
- N** ☐ Other (please specify below)

28. Which **ONE** of these is your **main source of funding** for your course fees? Please write in the *LETTER* from the list above that corresponds to your most important reason.

29. What amount of **repayable debt** do you anticipate having when you have completed your course? Please tick *ONE* box only. Do not include mortgages or existing debt prior to this course.

- ☐ None
- ☐ Up to £4,999
- ☐ £5,000-£9,999
- ☐ £10,000-£14,999
- ☐ £15,000-£19,999
- ☐ £20,000-£25,000
- ☐ Over £25,000

30. Have you done any **paid work** during your course? Please tick *ONE* box only.

- ☐ Not at all (please skip to question 28)
- ☐ During vacation(s) and during term time
- ☐ Only during vacation(s)
- ☐ Only during term time

31. **If you do paid work**, how many hours per week do you normally work? Please fill in *ONE* answer per line.

During term time: _____ hours

During vacations: _____ hours

32. If you don't do paid work, which of the following applies to you? Please tick ALL that apply.

- ☐ I do not need to do paid work
 - ☐ I do not want to do paid work
 - ☐ No time to do paid work due to the amount of work I have to do for my course
 - ☐ No time to do paid work due to extracurricular commitments
 - ☐ No time to do paid work due to family commitments
 - ☐ I prefer to do voluntary/unpaid work
 - ☐ I want to concentrate on studying in my final year
 - ☐ My university/department discourages paid work
 - ☐ Other (please specify below)
-

Section 3: Your future

33. What do you plan to do after you graduate? Please tick ONE box only.

- ☐ Obtain employment related to longer-term career plans
 - ☐ Become self-employed
 - ☐ Obtain temporary employment while I consider longer-term plans
 - ☐ Obtain temporary employment while I pay off my debt
 - ☐ Enrol on a postgraduate degree course
 - ☐ Undertake vocational training
 - ☐ Travel or take time out
 - ☐ Don't know
 - ☐ Other (please specify below)
-

34. How confident do you feel about achieving your plan within a year after you graduate? Please tick ONE box only.

- ☐ Very confident
- ☐ Quite confident
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Not very confident
- ☐ Not at all confident

35. Have your ideas about your career changed since you started your course? Please tick ONE box only.

- ☐ Yes, I have a much clearer idea of what I want to do
- ☐ Yes, my ideas about career direction have changed completely
- ☐ Yes, my ideas about career direction are less clear than before
- ☐ My experience of higher education has reinforced my original career plans
- ☐ My ideas are neither clearer nor less clear than before

36. On a scale of 1-7, where **1 means 'I have a clear idea** about the occupation I eventually want to enter and the qualifications required to do so' and **7 means 'I have no idea** what I will do after I complete my course', where would you put yourself? *Please circle ONE answer only.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

37. During your time at university/college, have you taken advantage of any of the following **careers information or guidance opportunities**? *Please tick ALL that apply.*

- ☐ University or college-wide careers event organised by the Careers Service
- ☐ Careers event for final year students
- ☐ Careers event for students doing your type of course
- ☐ Careers event for students interested in a particular occupation or industry
- ☐ Other careers event offered by Careers Service staff
- ☐ One-to-one careers advice session offered by Careers Service staff
- ☐ Talked to a Careers Service advisor about your course or career options
- ☐ Obtained Careers Service guidance or information by email or telephone
- ☐ Visited Careers Service website
- ☐ Visited other careers websites, e.g. Prospects
- ☐ Careers Service short courses or sessions to develop employment-related skills
- ☐ Completed compulsory module to develop employment-related skills
- ☐ Completed optional module to develop employment-related skills
- ☐ Obtained careers advice from family or friends
- ☐ Obtained careers advice from an employer or work organisation representative
- ☐ Obtained advice on CV writing
- ☐ Obtained advice on completing application forms
- ☐ Obtained training in interview technique
- ☐ Other careers guidance (e.g. from a public or private careers agency)
- ☐ Other (please specify below)

38. Have you applied for any **paid jobs** to start after graduation? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

39. Have you been offered a paid job to start after graduation that you have **accepted or plan to accept**? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ Yes (please answer question 37)
- ☐ No (please go to question 38)

40. If yes, please specify **job title and industry**.

Job title: _____

Industry: _____

41. Which of the following sources have you used to **look for future employment**, and how useful have you found them? *Please tick ONE answer per line.*

	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Not useful at all	Have not used
University/College-based Careers Advisory Service or their website					
Graduate vacancy publications/websites (e.g. Prospects)					
National press					
Local press					
Specialist publications (e.g. trade press, professional journals)					
Job Centre					
Independent employment agencies and their websites					
Other internet vacancy sites (e.g. Monster)					
Speculative approach to individual companies					
Prospective employers' websites					
Friends or family					
Other (please specify below) _____					

42. Have you applied or would you consider applying for any **unpaid jobs or graduate internships** to obtain experience related to your long-term career plans? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ Yes, I have already applied.
- ☐ Yes, I am considering doing so but have not applied yet.
- ☐ No, I would like to but I could not afford to do unpaid work.
- ☐ No, I would like to but I can't for some other reason.
- ☐ No, I would not like to or do not think it would be appropriate for me.

43. When you start work after completing your studies, how much do you realistically **expect to earn per year** before income tax, national insurance and other deductions? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ £0 - £9,999
- ☐ £10,000 - £20,999
- ☐ £21,000 - £29,999
- ☐ £30,000 - £39,999
- ☐ More than £40,000

44. In which of the following **geographical areas** have you applied, or would you consider applying for employment or an internship? *Please tick ALL that apply.*

- ☐ North East of England
- ☐ Yorkshire & Humberside
- ☐ North West of England, excluding Merseyside
- ☐ East Midlands
- ☐ West Midlands
- ☐ Eastern England
- ☐ Greater London
- ☐ South East England, excluding Greater London
- ☐ South West of England
- ☐ Wales
- ☐ Northern Ireland
- ☐ Scotland
- ☐ Merseyside
- ☐ Other European Union countries
- ☐ Other overseas locations

45. Have you applied, or do you expect to apply to do **another course or vocational training** next year (either full-time or part-time)? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ Yes, for a full-time course
- ☐ Yes, for a part-time course
- ☐ The job I have accepted or hope to do will include professional training
- ☐ No, I have not applied for another course or vocational training (please skip to question 48)
- ☐ Other (please specify below)

46. If yes, **which kind** of course/vocational training? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ Postgraduate Teaching Certificate
- ☐ Other vocational/professional training leading to professional qualification or diploma
- ☐ Other postgraduate diploma
- ☐ Taught Master's degree
- ☐ Ph.D or other research degree
- ☐ Other (please specify below)

47. **Why do you want to do** a further course/vocational training? *Please tick ONE box only.*

- ☐ It is essential for the career I wish to develop
- ☐ I believe it will give access to better career opportunities
- ☐ I wish to develop more specialist knowledge and expertise
- ☐ I wish to develop a broader range of knowledge and expertise
- ☐ I wish to change direction
- ☐ I wish to continue studying my subject(s) to a higher level
- ☐ I am interested in the course(s)
- ☐ To defer getting a job
- ☐ Other (please specify below)

48. Are there any **further comments** that you wish to make about any topics covered in this questionnaire?

Thank you for your participation. In the event that you would like to make any further comments on the topics covered in this questionnaire at a later date, please contact Jennifer Allen at jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk.

12.1.5 Participant information sheets and consent forms

12.1.5.1 Participant information sheet (experts and course leaders)

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Director Professor Anne Edwards



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

For experts, researchers, and current or former staff

Researcher Jennifer Allen Doctor of Philosophy in Education Student Department of Education University of Oxford jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk	Supervisors Dr. Hubert Ertl and Dr. Susan James Department of Education University of Oxford hubert.ertl@education.ox.ac.uk susan.james@education.ox.ac.uk
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Full title of study: Higher education provision in further education colleges: The transition of graduates into the labour market

Description: I am researching the experiences of higher education students as they pursue jobs during the final year of their course and just after graduation. My interests include why students choose to pursue different higher education qualifications and how the employment outcomes compare for students following similar courses at different institutions.

Methods: As one of my research methods, I will conduct interviews with experts, researchers, and current and former higher and further education staff members lasting approximately one hour each. The interviews will focus on the history of higher education in further education, policy issues, and research completed in this area. With permission from the interviewee, the interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed.

Ethics: In my research, I am abiding by the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association. The most recent version can be accessed at <http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/2011/08/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf>.

Confidentiality: The names of interviewees and the institutions they previously or currently work for will not be used in my final report. Quotes from the interviews will be included but will not be directly attributed to interviewees. However, it is possible that knowledgeable readers will be able to identify certain individuals. Only my supervisors and I will have access to the entirety of interview notes and transcriptions. If you are interested in reviewing the transcription of your interview or receiving a copy of my final report, please let me know.

Right to Withdraw: You do not have to take part in this study. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, please let me know by e-mailing jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk. You have the right to withdraw at any stage for any reason.

Results: The final report of the research findings will take the form of a doctoral thesis to be submitted by September 2014. If at any point before this date you wish to contribute further comments on the issues discussed in your interview, please contact me.

Enquiries can also be addressed to my supervisors, Dr. Hubert Ertl, at hubert.ertl@education.ox.ac.uk or Dr. Susan James at susan.james@education.ox.ac.uk.

Thank you for your participation.

12.1.5.2 Participant information sheet (students)

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Director Professor Anne Edwards

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**
For student and graduate participants

Researcher	Supervisors
Jennifer Allen Doctor of Philosophy in Education Student Department of Education University of Oxford jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk	Dr. Hubert Ertl and Dr. Susan James Department of Education University of Oxford hubert.ertl@education.ox.ac.uk susan.james@education.ox.ac.uk

Full title of study: Higher education provision in further education colleges: The transition of graduates into the labour market

Description: I am researching the experiences of higher education students as they pursue jobs during the final year of their course and just after graduation. My interests include why students choose to pursue different higher education qualifications and how the employment outcomes compare for students following similar courses at different institutions.

Methods: As one of my research methods, I will conduct interviews with current students and recent graduates lasting approximately one hour each. The interviews will focus on the students' motivations for pursuing higher education, what students plan to do after graduation, and what they actually do after graduation. With permission from the interviewee, the interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed. If possible, I would like to conduct a minimum of two interviews with each interviewee.

Ethics: In my research, I am abiding by the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association. The most recent version can be accessed at <http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/2011/08/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf>.

Confidentiality: The names of interviewees will not be used in my final report. Quotes from the interviews will be included but will not be directly attributed to interviewees. Only my supervisors and I will have access to the entirety of interview notes and transcriptions. If you are interested in reviewing the transcription of your interview or receiving a copy of my final report, please let me know.

Right to Withdraw: You do not have to take part in this study. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, please let me know by e-mailing jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk. You have the right to withdraw at any stage for any reason. Whether you choose to participate or to withdraw will not have any impact on your studies.

Results: The final report of the research findings will take the form of a doctoral thesis to be submitted by September 2014. If at any point before this date you wish to contribute further comments on the issues discussed in your interview, please contact me.

Enquiries can also be addressed to my supervisors, Dr. Hubert Ertl at hubert.ertl@education.ox.ac.uk or Dr. Susan James at susan.james@education.ox.ac.uk.

Thank you for your participation.

12.1.5.3 Consent form (for all participants)

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Director Professor Anne Edwards



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
For all participants

Researcher	Supervisors
Jennifer Allen Doctor of Philosophy in Education Student Department of Education University of Oxford jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk	Dr. Hubert Ertl and Dr. Susan James Department of Education University of Oxford hubert.ertl@education.ox.ac.uk susan.james@education.ox.ac.uk

Full title of study: Higher education provision in further education colleges: The transition of graduates into the labour market

Purpose of study: To research why students choose to pursue different higher education qualifications and how the employment outcomes compare for students following similar courses at different institutions.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information sheet for this study and have had the opportunity to ask questions, which have been answered fully.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to raise concerns or withdraw at any time for any reason without my studies being affected. I am aware that I can raise a concern or withdraw by e-mailing Jennifer Allen at jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk.
3. I understand that this study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. I am aware that I can contact this committee at ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk or +44 (0)1865 614871 if I wish to make a formal complaint about this study.
4. I understand that my name will not be used in the researcher's final report and that the only people with access to the interviews in their entirety will be the researcher and her supervisors. I give permission for these individuals to have access to notes and/or recordings from these interviews.
5. I understand that the notes and/or recordings from these interviews will be stored electronically in password-protected folders.
6. I understand that I am entitled to a signed copy of this form if requested.
7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant:

Name of Investigator:

Signature of Participant:

Signature of Investigator:

Date:

Date:

12.1.5.4 Background information form (students)

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Director Professor Ernesto Macaro

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION FORM**

Please complete this form in advance of your interview and send it to Jennifer Allen at jennifer.allen@education.ox.ac.uk.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

First name	
Surname	
Primary phone number	
Email address	
Age	
Ethnic group (please circle or highlight one)	White Mixed Asian or Asian British Black or Black British Other (please specify):
Are you currently in employment or completing an internship? (please circle or highlight one)	Employment Internship Not applicable
If so, how many hours per week do you work during term time? During vacations?	_____ hours during term time _____ hours during vacations

PRIOR EDUCATION INFORMATION

Please circle the grade you received for any GCSEs you took. If a subject you took is not listed, please write in a blank next to other subject.						
Mathematics:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
English:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Science:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Physical Education:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Other subject 1:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Other subject 2:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Other subject 3:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Other subject 4:	A*	A	B	C	D	E
Other subject 5:	A*	A	B	C	D	E

Please list the subjects and circle the grade you received for any A-levels you took.							
Subject:	A*	A	B	C	D	E	U
Subject:	A*	A	B	C	D	E	U
Subject:	A*	A	B	C	D	E	U
Subject:	A*	A	B	C	D	E	U
Subject:	A*	A	B	C	D	E	U
Subject:	A*	A	B	C	D	E	U
Subject:	A*	A	B	C	D	E	U

**CURRENT EDUCATION INFORMATION**

Current educational institution	
Title of current course	
Attendance status (full-time or part-time)	
Fees per year	
How do you pay your fees? (please circle or highlight all that apply)	Scholarship/bursary/grant Government loan Private loan Wages Money from parents/guardian/family members Other (please specify):
How do you pay your living expenses? (please circle or highlight all that apply)	Scholarship/bursary/grant Government loan Private loan Wages Money from parents/guardian/family members Other (please specify):
Where do you live during term-time? (please circle or highlight one)	Alone in house/flat/lodgings With parents With partner/spouse and/or children With friends/students in rented accommodation In college/university-provided accommodation Other (please specify below)
Approximately how many hours per week do you spend attending lectures and/or seminars related to your course?	
Approximately how many hours per week do you spend studying/working on assignments outside of lectures and/or seminars?	

12.1.5.5 Background information form for Gardiner College

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Director Professor Ernesto Macaro

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION FORM**

To be completed by each interview participant in Jennifer Allen's research

PERSONAL INFORMATION

First name	
Surname	
Primary phone number	
Email address	
Age	
Ethnic group (please tick one only)	☐ White ☐ Mixed ☐ Asian or Asian British ☐ Black or Black British ☐ Other (please specify):
What is your current job title?	
How long have you been in your current job?	_____ years _____ months
What is your current industry?	
How long have you been in this industry?	_____ years _____ months
Do you own your own business?	☐ Yes ☐ No, but I would like to in the future ☐ No, and I do not plan to in the future

CURRENT EDUCATION INFORMATION

Title of recently completed degree course	
Fees per year	
How did you pay your fees? (please tick all that apply)	☐ Scholarship/bursary/grant ☐ Government loan ☐ Private loan ☐ Wages ☐ Money from family members ☐ Other (please specify):
Approximately how many hours per week did you spend attending lectures and/or seminars related to your course during your top-up year?	
Approximately how many hours per week did you spend studying/working on assignments outside of lectures and/or seminars during your top-up year?	

12.2 Appendix B: Analysis materials

12.2.1 Initial coding framework

academic performance	
accommodation	
aspirations	
assessment	
background	
benefits of course/institution	
business links	
careers support	
college like school	
confidence building	
course requirements	
course structure	
course timetable	
coursework	
current employment	
debt	
decision-making	course
decision-making	subject
decision-making	institution
demographics	
differences between uni/college	
Dragons' Den	
expectations of course	
family history of HE	
fees	
former employment	
future earnings	
future employment	
future location	
graduate schemes	
improvements to course	
influence of tutors/staff	
learning style	
learning throughout course	
modules	
paying off debt	
perceptions of college/uni	
post-graduation plans	
perceptions of labour market/value of degree	
procrastination	
PT vs FT	

qualifications needed for future employment	
reasons for working	
recommend course	
reflections on course	
relationships	tutors/staff
relationships	students
resources	
schedule	
skills development	
student numbers	
support from institution	
support offered by tutors/staff	
transition from work to uni	
tutors'/institution's expectations of students	
university validation	
work placement/internship	
workload	

12.2.2 Developed coding framework

academic performance
admission requirements
anxiety about career
apprenticeships
aspirations
assessment
background
benefits of course
benefits of institution
business links
career exploration
changes recommended
college like school
confidence boost
Connexions
course requirements
course structure
coursework
debt
decision institution
decision qualification
decision subject
devalued degrees
differences between university and college
employment current
employment former
employment future
exams
expectations of course
family history of HE
fees
future location
grade boundaries
graduate scheme
grant
improvements to course
influence of tutors
job requirements
knowledge application
learning outside of course
learning throughout course
life at college

marking scheme
mature student
modules
not academic/educational
part-time vs full-time
partnerships
paying off debt
perceptions of degree value in labour market
perceptions of university
personal characteristics
personal circumstances
post-graduation plans
procrastination
qualifications needed for future employment
ranking tables
reasons for working
recommend course
reflections on course
relationship with staff
relationships with students
skills development
student numbers
student representation
support academic
support career
support family
support from institution
support welfare
timetable
transition from work to university
university validation
VET
what is higher education?
work placement
workload

12.2.3 Final coding framework

Descriptive codes	
<i>Code</i>	<i>Sub-code</i>
age	mature
	non-mature
attendance status	full-time
	part-time
employment	current
	former
family history of HE	
former qualifications	
gender	female
	male
Topic codes	
<i>Code</i>	<i>Sub-code</i>
benefits	of course
	of institution
course structure	modules
	timetable
	assessment
decisions	institution
	qualification
	subject
employment	future expectations
	Internship/ work placement
	graduate scheme
	requirements for jobs
fees and funding	grant/scholarship
	loan
	debt
goals	6 months after graduation
	3-5 years
	lifetime
partnerships	
relationships	family
	tutors/lecturers
	coursemates
Analytical codes	
<i>Code</i>	<i>Sub-code</i>
boundaries	within individual
	within institution
	between roles
culture	school

	college
	university
	in labour market
'figured world'	agents
	changes of state
	forces
influence	of family
	of tutors/lecturers
	of coursemates
	of employers
identity	academic
	non-academic
transitions	work to college
	FE to HE
	HE to work
value of degree	to individual
	to labour market