University of Southampton

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Exploring student perspectives of employer engagement as part of their higher education learner journey

By

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Exploring student perspectives of employer engagement as part of their higher education learner journey

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This EdD research explored employer engagement (EE) in the context of higher education (HE) from the student perspective. The study focused on fifteen final year undergraduate students on an adventure and outdoor management course at a post-92 HE institution in England. EE, vocational learning and widening participation were key themes explored and linked to the learner-life course, learning cultures/identities (habitus, structure and agency), transition theory, careership and horizons for action.

Data were generated qualitatively through focus groups and interviews in which students reflected on their three year learner journey, including pre-HE decision-making, EE experiences through the course, and impact on careership and employability in preparation for graduation. Participants were mostly non-traditional learners in education, class and status and predominately first generation university students from BTEC backgrounds. Participants shared career aspirations and personal passions for the contemporary and growing field of the adventure and outdoor industry. This offered a unique focus and indicated positive and negative implications for future graduate careers in this field.

Findings support the positive benefits of EE activities within a vocational degree but there is a complex balance required in managing pressures faced by industry/HEIs and the often forgotten perspective of students. Students shared characteristics drawn together in vocational habitus, but showed individuality in values, dispositions and behaviours, which were often changeable, influenced by complex and multi-layered structures and fields in which they were positioned. Student demands and expectations, whether individual or shared, were often in conflict with the agendas and objectives set at the meso HEI level and the increasing demands at macro level from government and industry.
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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Lynsey Marie Melhuish

Title of thesis: Exploring student perspectives of employer engagement as part of their higher education learner journey

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:

Signature: Date:

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### Abbreviations

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<th>Description</th>
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<td>AHE</td>
<td>Advance HE (formerly the Higher Education Academy)</td>
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<td>CBI</td>
<td>Confederation of British Industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLHE</td>
<td>Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (now Graduate Outcome Survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBIS</td>
<td>Department for Business and Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>Employer Engagement</td>
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<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher Education Institute</td>
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<td>KPI</td>
<td>Key performance indicators</td>
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<td>NAO</td>
<td>National Audit Office</td>
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<td>NSS</td>
<td>National Student Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>QAA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEF</td>
<td>Teaching Excellence Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<td>WP</td>
<td>Widening Participation</td>
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Chapter 1  Introduction and Rationale

1.1  Background and context

UK universities are under increasing pressure to respond to global challenges in a growing competitive environment to provide excellence in teaching, cutting edge research and innovation (DBIS 2016a). A significant focus is to deliver higher education (HE) which strengthens university/employer collaboration in work placements, graduate internships, knowledge exchange, enterprise and work-based learning (Tudor and Mendez 2014). This is reinforced by the long awaited Augar Report (DBIS 2019) which recognises the benefits of partnership working and in offering ‘a considerable civic contribution’, describing universities as being ‘torch carriers for economic, cultural, social and environmental development’ (DBIS 2019:9). However, this report also reveals further challenges to universities regarding post-18 education and funding and ensuring efficiency, effectiveness and ‘value for money’ within fair and equitable provision.

The underpinning theme of my study is employer engagement (EE) within HE and its application today and for the future from the student perspective. In this changing, tumultuous world, universities are integral in developing graduates with the right skills, knowledge and attitudes (CBI 2009; Wilson 2012; DBIS 2016a) to prepare them for transition into work and with the ability to adapt as society demands. However, it is also important to explore the impact of EE activities from the student perspective, not only in aiding employability but more generally to satisfy the student experience which is often lost in a sea of government rhetoric and political and economic argument (DBIS 2011; 2014; 2015). Demands in new HE policy such as Advance HE (AHE) and associated government initiatives such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) reinforced the rationale for my study, indicating that the student perspective is crucial (Moore et al. 2017) whilst recognising the differing values of HE experiences, influenced by multiple stakeholders (Sabri 2011).
Chapter 1

A cohort of students on the final year of a vocationally based undergraduate degree were the focus of the research. This course is delivered within a post-1992 HE institute (HEI), where I am currently employed as a Course Leader. The HEI and cohort were selected due to the relevance, appropriateness and accessibility in exploring EE from student perspectives. It also allowed me to explore implications of vocational HE provision, targeting what is sometimes referred rather ambiguously as non-traditional learners (Taylor and House 2010). For this investigation, non-traditional learners represented lower classes from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with generally lower academic abilities, representative of minority groups (Reay et al. 2005; 2009; 2010; 2018). This included first generation university learners, those accessing HE through non-traditional HE entry qualifications and those pursuing non-traditional academic HE disciplines (Shattock 2012).

Themes of inclusivity were pertinent regarding post-1992 HEI philosophy and synonymous with the education for all mantra (Barton 2003) and which remains prominent in the Augar Report (DBIS 2019). Issues such as class prejudice and the impact that it can have on student decision-making (Archer et al. 2003), reputation of old versus new (Shattock 2012), the two-tier system (Smith 2007), and the academic/vocational divide (Brockmann 2012) were all relevant. Vocational degrees often attract non-traditional learners and by moving away from academic disciplines (Shattock 2012) but these contemporary programmes often have a stigma attached (Boliver 2013). Bourdieu’s (1990) conceptual tools were applied to the study relating to habitus, structure and agency and concepts associated with the learner identity, the life-course, transitions and horizons for action (Heinz and Kruger 2001; Shildrick and McDonald 2006). Studies such as Crozier and Reay (2008), Basit and Tomlinson (2012), Tomlinson (2014), McCaig (2015) and Reay (2018) further highlight numerous intertwined assumptions and misconceptions regarding widening participation (WP), inclusivity, social mobility and the contemporary HE environment (Bathmaker et al. 2016). Furthermore, it was important in this study to address the ambiguity and interchangeable terms associated with real-world, experiential learning, vocational degrees and the complexities of their use/miss use in HEIs.
By exploring one group my study did not offer generalisability across the HE landscape. Values of this research were instead directed to the school and university where the course is located. As a post-1992 HEI, my university prides itself on being inclusive, consistently promoting real-world terminology and most recently through a newly developed ‘real-world’ curriculum framework (Appendix A). At a time where there appears continued pressure on HEIs to justify this approach (Wilkins and Burke 2015) my study allowed the impact of such initiatives to be better understood for frontline staff, as well as at strategic management level to raise the university profile within a competitive, global HE environment (Hazelkorn 2015). This embraces recent works by Kahu and Nelson (2018) who proposed an educational interface which focused on the interactions between students and HEIs, psychosocial constructs (emotions and belonging) and the demographic characteristics which influence retention, engagement and success. In my study these three perspectives are explored although the student perspective being most prevalent.

I wanted to design a study that informed practitioners and to aid senior decision-making about EE strategy, but reflecting student experiences, as opposed to other stakeholder perspectives. Outcomes of my study will be useful to other post-1992 HEIs where a commitment to WP and vocational, real-world EE is prioritised. This allows findings to be shared at HE conferences and through journals to enhance pedagogic practice. Overall the purpose of the study was to explore EE opportunities and how this impacted the HE learner journey, trajectories and associated career progression. This began by exploring pre-HE learner identities and backgrounds to the selected group and then what role EE activities had in building vocational dispositions and in broadening and strengthening individual career aspirations across the three years and ready for post-graduation.

1.2 Outlining the EE agenda within HE

EE comes in various pedagogic guises, such as work-based learning, (Brennan 2005; Brennan and Little 2006; Lester and Costley 2010) and experiential (Kolb and Kolb 2005; Mezirow and Taylor 2009) or practice-based learning (Kennedy et al. 2015). Influenced by numerous white papers (DBIS 2011; 2014; 2015; 2016a), it highlights the importance of
student experiences and asks universities to ‘look again at how they work with business across their teaching and research activities, to promote better teaching, employer sponsorship, innovation and enterprise’ (DBIS 2011:6). Exploring EE definitions in relation to HE was integral in providing parameters for the study and recognising key works such as Wedgewood (2008) and Bolden et al. (2009) which developed a range of models to what is an ambiguous concept. HE is a key driver (and tool) for developing skills and training to contribute positively to the economy (Fuller et al. 2011). However, it is important, to ensure that macro political outcomes are harmonious with application at meso/micro levels, and that the learner, who is integral to this process, is able to engage with EE activities as part of their academic studies to satisfy their personal aspirations, as well as contribute to the bigger global picture.

1.3 Reinforcing the rationale

There are increasing and unprecedented challenges facing HE currently, revealed most recently by the Augar Report (DBIS 2019) but fuelled by previous pressures over the last few years. This includes direct influence from new UK policy such as the TEF, subsequent funding models (DBIS 2016), ongoing debates regarding tuition fees, value for money and financial independence (Coughlan 2018), through to indirect and arguably more threatening long-term issues such as the unpredictability of Brexit and subsequent turmoil of the UK political arena (Westwood 2017; Coughlan 2019a) and wider fears associated with domestic and international instability. It is a turbulent time for HEIs so it is important that my EdD research has potential to inform future policy and practice within my university, as well as having potential to inform other similar HEIs. Whilst EE is not a solution to the evolving crisis at a global level, it does have the capacity to contribute to developing UK HE policy (Wilson 2012; Williamson et al. 2013) and through underpinning concepts, relating to the student experience and the learner journey. Whilst the questionable proposals of TEF are still in infancy in terms of application and with suggested flaws (Ashwin 2016; Gibbs 2017), the principles of successful EE and the impact on student satisfaction and associated key performance indicators (KPIs) have the potential to provide recommendations on EE at macro as well as meso/micro level.
1.4 The vocational focus: adventure and outdoor degrees

I have previously argued how research can contribute to improved macro stakeholder collaboration (Melhuish 2016) and with a focus on the emerging trends and patterns with the vocational field where this study is focused (adventure and outdoor industries). A combination of factors were highlighted that could impact on future graduate career progression in this field, covering continued and conflicting arguments within the industry as to what an adventure and outdoor degree should include and the rationalisation of such degrees across the UK (largely influenced by increased tuition fees, increased competition, lower student no’s and the ongoing criticism of non-traditional, vocational degrees).

However, whilst vocational degrees may be condensing to respond to HEI pressures, the adventure industry itself is growing and diversifying significantly resulting in a potential imbalance between graduate demand and supply, which could result in there not being enough graduates to satisfy industry needs (Melhuish 2016). Outcomes from my EdD study have the potential to build on this by advising HE/government stakeholders on generic issues regarding EE and more specifically within adventure/outdoor industries.

1.5 Parameters of Employer Engagement (EE) in relation to this study

As EE is an ambiguous concept and can vary in understanding and application, dependent on the stakeholder perspective being explored, it was important to set parameters for my study. For the purposes of my research I focused on EE activities and associated support, provided through my HEI and specifically organised to enhance student learning through my course curriculum and associated extra-curricular activity. Table 1.1 illustrates the different EE activities myself and colleagues at my HEI organised in collaboration with industry:
Table 1.1 EE within the course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Curriculum /extra-curricular area</th>
<th>Type of EE activity organised by my HEI as part of the course</th>
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| 4/5/6     | Welcome /Returners Week & end of year | Field trips  
Day trip to local outdoor centre to participate in adventurous pursuits for team building, personal/social development and tour local centre and network with staff |
|           | Termly within timetabled workshops | HEI Employability Service talks  
Talks on services available to aid students regarding career development including job shop, CVs, interview techniques, networking/graduate opportunities and online tools and resources |
| 4         | Module Introduction to the Adventure Industry | Five day residential  
Overnight week residential at an outdoor centre in the southwest to participate in adventurous pursuits and to learn about the operational, technical and management aspects of the industry. Including application of theory to practice and networking and career talks with staff and senior management |
| 4 5/6     | Modules Employability Skills/Work Placement/Contemporary Issues | Programme of visiting speakers  
Weekly guest speakers from the adventure/outdoor industry to discuss volunteering, placements, recruitment as well as management/operational and technical topics about the industry |
|           | Extra-curricular                   | Work placements  
4 week compulsory industry placements (paid or unpaid) between summer of Level 4 and Level 5 plus additional ‘optional’ opportunities offered to Level 5 and Level 6 students |
|           |                                   | Adventure conference & exhibitions  
Trips to industry conference and exhibitions through the year for networking purposes |
|           |                                   | Clubs and Societies  
Students have the opportunity to join adventure/outdoor clubs and societies at university and take on committee roles to enhance CV/employability skills and associated industry networking |
| 4/5/6     | Modules Outdoor Coaching | Practical activity  
Offsite practical at local outdoor centres to develop practical/technical and coaching skills and experiences with the potential to achieve National Governing Body (NGB) qualifications to work in the industry |
| 5/6       | Modules Adventure Recreation/Contemporary Issues | Day and overnight field trips  
Day and one night field trips to a range of commercial and educational outdoor/adventure environments to show the breadth of the industry. Participation, tour and talks with staff and management on operational/management aspects and recruitment opportunities |
| 4/5/6     | Modules Eg Health and Safety, Marketing, HR Management, Dissertation | Real life/scenario based assessments  
Module assessments at all levels provide scenario based tasks and/or with the potential to undertake a ‘live’ project with a case study employer |
1.6 Informing practice

My study aimed to offer a refreshing insight from the student perspective at the metaphoric coal face regarding EE and associated concepts relating to the learner journey. As Gedye and Beaumont (2018:406) acknowledge in their more recent study of sport undergraduate students, this is often the ‘missing perspective’ regarding employability and graduate readiness. Furthermore, as a post-1992 HEI, my own workplace has the potential to benefit from study outcomes. Whilst it suffers in reputation comparable with higher ranked/Russell Group HEIs (Chapleo 2006) and against arbitrary national league tables (Shattock 2010; Hazelkorn 2015), its accessible, inclusive values, student-led approach and commitment to vocational, real-world experiences, appear finely tuned with the foundations of the TEF/new apprenticeship degrees, and the UK government’s HE vision for the future. Conversely, negative outcomes from my research could jeopardise this HEI in justifying the benefits of vocational and work related activities as part of a degree programme. These EE values form part of my HEIs unique selling point and which is further threatened by Russell Group HEIs aiming to broaden accessibility and appeal (Russell Group 2015; Coughlan 2019b) and thus increasing competition further.

1.7 Study research questions, aim and objectives

My overarching research question for the study was: “What are student perspectives regarding employer engagement as part of their HE learner journey?” A subdivision of inter-related questions defined the parameters of the study further:

- How is EE defined within the literature (from different stakeholder perspectives)?
- How do students define EE and related terminology?
- How do students feel about EE opportunities as part of their decision-making (pre-HE), and experiences during their learner journey?
- What value do students give to EE opportunities in enhancing future employment prospects post-graduation?
• How do student perspectives compare with other stakeholder perspectives at meso/macro level? (from existing literature)
• Do students’ responses on EE strengthen the case for vocationally based undergraduate degrees and does it reveal benefits to non-traditional students in post-92 institutions?

Questions were adapted and amended as the proposal and research planning stages evolved, as recommended by Delamont (2012). This demonstrated a flexible design (Robson 2011) in the research planning process, which enabled a final aim and specific objectives to be established to help frame the study clearly and objectively (Kumar 2014). It was important that I had the confidence and awareness to embrace a flexible approach during the research design stage and in regularly self-reflecting on my decision-making as part of this process. It was clear that my own positionality, role as an insider and my personal and professional passions for the study area, had the potential to override the process and this could have clouded my judgement when establishing the research questions and associated research approach. I was mindful of this throughout the process and it was particularly important to respond to this when establishing the final aim and objectives. Initially my research questions and related objectives could have been criticised for potential bias and subjectivity. My decision early in the process to remove ‘beyond policy and pontification’ as part of my original title demonstrates clearly how my positionality had the potential to influence, as I already had a critical view that the student voice was often lost in macro stakeholder rhetoric. For me, it was important to give students the chance to express their views and opinions on EE and this became the focal point of the final aim and objectives for the study, set out in a clear and transparent format.

Aim of the study

Explore student perspectives on EE within a vocational undergraduate degree, delivered at a post-1992 HEI and concepts associated with the learner journey/life-course and subsequent learner trajectories;
Objectives of the study

1. Critically review existing literature and theoretical, practical and political concepts of EE in the HE environment in the UK and in relation to the student perspective and associated learner-life course;
2. Analyse 15 Level 6 (year 3), student perspectives on the EE experiences provided across a three-year course, using primary qualitative data on student reflections thoughts, feelings, opinions and knowledge and skills obtained as part of their ‘learner journey’, from Pre-HE and course selection to preparation for transition to the workplace;
3. Review student understanding of EE terminology and purpose at HE, government and industry level
4. Review learning transitions, trajectories and the learner journey in association with EE experiences and the impact/implications for non-traditional students studying a vocational undergraduate degree, within a post-1992 HEI.
5. Provide recommendations to practitioners and senior management within the HEI workplace and across the HE field to aid future EE strategy and practice.

Chapter 2 now presents the key literature relating to these research questions, aim and objectives, which informed the methodology (Chapter 3) and subsequent findings (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), discussion (Chapter 6) and final conclusions and recommendations (Chapter 7).
Chapter 2  Literature Review

I undertook an initial scoping exercise to identify a range of theories, empirical research and conceptual perspectives relating to EE within HE associated learner journeys and underpinned by related stakeholders (Figure 2.1). This was both an inspiring and challenging stage early in my study as it became clear to me very quickly that I had a particular fascination with the emergent topics relating to the learner life-course. However, whilst the literature review highlighted the relevance of this to my study, I had to consider how this best fitted with the main focal point of the student perspective on EE activities. Furthermore, I was conscious that my own growing interest in this area had the potential to digress from the study.

Figure 2.1 Initial mapping of literature topics
As my review of the literature progressed I was able to see more clearly how issues associated with the learner life-course and journey could be beneficial in providing an underpinning structure to my study and in a way that did not deviate from the EE focus. I was able to harness my new found interest in the learner life-course, using it to set the scene on the background and dispositions of my students pre-HE, and then to explore their HE learner journey and exposure to EE activities throughout the course, in preparation for graduation and future careers.

In this chapter primary topics as illustrated in Fig 2.1, are discussed initially, exploring wider EE issues surrounding definitions, parameters (including the WP and inclusivity agenda) and different stakeholder perspectives at macro, meso and micro level including exploration of the vocational focus of my study within adventure and outdoor industries. This is followed by topics which have emerged from the literature review and more specifically relate to the student perspective, the learner life course and the influence of Bourdieu’s concepts of structure, habitus and field, and how these can consciously and sub consciously effect learner agency.

2.1 Parameters/definitions of EE and stakeholder perspectives

One of the first challenges in researching EE in HEIs is establishing parameters within a dynamic field (Bolden et al. 2009; Witty 2013). Referred to as a slippery term (Aspen 2007), the complexity of definitions is extensive and relate to life-long learning from the cradle to the grave (OECD 2007). Terms such as work-based, real-world, vocational and professional experiences (Tudor and Mendez 2014) are often used together. Related terms including experiential learning (Kolb and Kolb 2005), blended learning (Garrison and Kanuka 2004) and ambiguous terms referring to formal and informal learning, all result in a sea of interchangeable theoretical concepts and practice. This is a significant challenge as diverse stakeholders embrace various terms to satisfy agendas which stretch the political, academic and operational spectrum. This reaffirms the triadic nature (Aspin and Chapman...
2000) of EE, highlighting benefits associated with economic progress and development, personal (humanist) fulfilment and societal dimensions relating to inclusiveness and democratic understanding. Stanley and Mann (2014) summarise these as a family of theoretical concepts; human, social and cultural capital, based on the learner life-course and its contribution to society. It is important for my study to explore how they manifest at each stakeholder level, as Petrov et al. (2016) demonstrated when studying workforce collaboration.

2.1.1 Macro stakeholders (government)

As Lumby (2015:8) states, macro-politics entails ‘overt political lobbying and manoeuvring to gain advantage on the regional or national stage’ and where political, economic, socio-cultural and other external factors (e.g. technological, environmental) influence strategic agendas on a global scale. The DBIS (2016a:2) continues to recognise HE as being critical in ‘raising productivity and economic growth’. Reiterating policy and research over the last decade (DBIS 2009; 2011, 2014; Wilson 2012; Witty 2013), the current UK government has a clear agenda in creating a highly skilled workforce. This is seen as ‘important to meet the needs of the twenty first century labour market’ (Holmes and Mayhew 2014: 92) driven by globalisation and the international marketplace. The HM Treasury (2015) echoes this widely and it is apparent that the UK government sees EE, through university and industry collaborations, as integral to contributing effectively to the economy and society. Employers support this with an agenda to increase labour productivity (Bolden et al. 2009). However, employer demands vary and influence the differing layers connecting learning and the workplace (Unwin et al. 2007). EE also offers powerful contributions for socio-cultural goals in inequalities, lower earnings and social mobility (Brennan 2008; Reay 2007; Reay et al. 2010; Bathmaker et al. 2016), topics pertinent to my study.

Political pressures are substantial in HE and it was important that I reflected upon this and the impact on EE policy. It is evident that government continues to initiate extensive research in this arena (Wilson 2012; Witty 2013; Williamson et al. 2013) and,
unsurprising, methods which utilise quantifiable data and outcomes are often preferred. Statistics evidence success or justify new and changing EE policy to satisfy the UK taxpayer, industry and global audiences. These performance measures offer generalisability, across UK HEIs and with potential for global comparability. The wealth of publications produced by the HE Statistics Agency yearly, on staff, student, business and community issues demonstrate this (Nixon et al. 2006) and the more recent introduction of TEF as a tool for equating future HE funding reinforces the need for tangible measures. However, problems occur with quantifiable measures due to the diverse range of EE activities and the differing ways in which this can be measured. For example, work placements, live projects and the involvement of guest speakers all have different components so cannot be measured comparably. Whilst the national school curriculum has standardisation, EE is far more creative in HE and is largely dependent on the employers and the engagement that they are willing to offer.

2.1.2 Employer / labour market demands

The Lambert Report (Lambert 2003) and the Leitch Report (Leitch 2006) demonstrate the importance of the global economy. The former explored creative opportunities with business, research and development for successful employer/business collaboration. It concluded by highlighting areas requiring significant investment, in terms of time and resources from each of the triadic stakeholders. For my study, research outcomes help align differing (and shared) stakeholder agendas at the macro level. To strengthen the importance of HEIs, employers and government working together, the Leitch Report (Leitch 2006) developed collaborative concepts focusing on the UK’s long-term skill needs. The report recognised the growth in employment rates, rising school standards and increased graduate places within the last decade but also exposed weaknesses internationally, warning ‘the UK’s skill base will still lag behind that of many comparator countries in 2020’ (Leitch 2006:3). The Report argued that there was a direct correlation between skills, productivity and employment and highlighted risks from low skilled workers, increasing inequality, deprivation and poverty. This strengthens the importance of exploring WP in my research, as my post-1992 university workplace, course and participants represent this broadening skills agenda. According to the report (Leitch
‘the best form of welfare is to ensure that people can adapt to change … skills are now increasingly the key lever’ for prosperity and fairness. This justifies exploring beyond traditional university disciplines and how different learners meet the diverse skill sets demanded.

Government policy continues to advocate employer and university collaborations as being essential for economic prosperity. Wilson (2012:1) states how universities are key to the supply chain yet to be sustainable, they are not a simple linear, supplier-purchaser model, instead, strength and resilience is essential through close working and an understanding of each stakeholder’s ‘priorities and capabilities’ including Local Enterprise Partnerships to maximise economic potential (Witty 2013). Forging Futures (Universities UK 2014) proposes that collaboration enables employers to directly support skill development that will benefit their business in the future, whilst universities offer up to date, relevant knowledge maximising graduate employability. It describes an ‘increasing appetite and enthusiasm for collaboration’ with university agendas focusing on reputation and productivity to differentiate themselves from competition by offering new ways to raise positive employability outcomes. As Minocha et al. (2014: 244) state, HEIs are under increasing pressure globally to produce a ‘supply pipeline of graduate level talent to employers and industry’.

### 2.1.3 Defining EE in HE

Literature suggests there are attempts to formalise the way EE is theorised and facilitated in HE (Lester and Costley 2010). Over a decade ago Brodie and Irving (2007) described the growth of rigorous pedagogies in work-based learning as embryonic. Lucas et al. (2013: 128) went on to advocate real-world and expansive education to encourage pedagogic practice and decision-making which allow ‘students to emerge … with the kinds of dispositions and mind-sets that will enable them to thrive in an uncertain world’. Wedgwood (2008) produced a range of models to express the complexities of multiple markets and goes some way to explain the different agendas within HE/EE collaboration (Figure 2.2). This evolved model identifies four angles to the multi-layered approaches
between macro and micro level. The research and academic perspectives lean to traditional HEI outcomes on status and impact of research globally. The societal angle, combined with teaching, address the impact of EE regarding socio-economic and cultural outcomes showing the potential it has for responding to WP and inclusion. This links neatly with the cohort for my study in addressing factors influencing the learner journey. The Wedgewood model identifies many facets to EE and how stakeholders focus on specific elements dependent on their agenda. This explains the complexities within the HEI, employer/employee (learner) tripartite relationship (Dhillon et al. 2011; Basit et al. 2015) and how the learner’s experience (at the micro level) is arguably choreographed by macro/meso influences. My study re-addresses this by focusing solely on the student perspective.

Figure 2.2 The Wedgewood Diversity with Excellence Model (Wedgewood 2008:10)

Bolden et al. (2009) illustrate an alternative model (Figure 2.3). This includes new ventures, enhancement of existing programmes; bespoke courses, workshops and seminars, through to employer-based placements, assessment and/or accreditation.
In comparison to Figure 2.2, Bolden’s model presents a more practical tool based approach, identifying specific activities that are used to shape EE within an HEI environment. For the purposes of my research the teaching and business engagement angles are particularly relevant, with student placements, career advice and curriculum development informing discussion topics for my study. However, as Huddleston and Lazcik (2018: 262) highlight, successful EE collaborations rely on employers effectively contributing to the learner journey through meaningful provision which is worthwhile both to the employer and the learner. They reiterate the importance of ensuring that EE activities are ‘carefully matched’ in terms of expertise, experience, capacity and motivation. Failing this HEIs may find themselves trying to collaborate with employers who are ‘reluctant passengers’ as opposed to being in the ‘driving seat’, which will only have a detrimental effect. Bolli et al. (2017) echo these perspectives arguing that the strength of education-employment linkage (EEL) depends on the quality of the interaction and with the qualifications and curriculum to be developed.

2.1.4 Meso/micro stakeholder perspectives on EE

Defining EE and how this is interpreted within a university environment is important to my study as the model of Bolden et al. (2009) illustrates. This is clarified by the observation of
Mann et al. (2014:2) that ‘employer engagement in education reflects a wider range of foci and interests … [including] relationships between employers, employees and students in many forms’. Whilst there is little research on the student perspective and understanding of employability and associated terms, Gedye and Beaumont’s (2018) recent study on student understanding of employability definitions showed how a student’s articulation of EE vocabulary developed as they progressed their learner journey. The study showed that student understanding shifted from recognising extrinsic perspectives (on what employers want), through to intrinsic value on what the students could offer employers. This indicates the positive influence an HEI can have on developing and expanding a learner’s understanding of their employability and wider role.

Pegg et al., on behalf of the HEA (2012), presented the diversity of opportunity in EE related activity to strengthen the role of HEIs in developing learner employability skills. Heyler and Lee (2014) provide depth to the skills essential in obtaining a job, such as interview techniques, job-searching skills, professional curriculum vitae creation, through to skills needed to carry out a job effectively, the latter focusing on generic transferability (teamwork, organisational and communication skills), personal attributes (punctuality, self-confidence, deadline management) as well as specific/subject abilities. In my study participants are exposed to EE opportunities including work placements, guest speakers, industry visits and real-life briefs reflective of experiential learning and the impact of such activities is essential to see whether this aiding their learner journey and progression into future graduate careers through development of employability skills.

The close reciprocal relationship between HEIs, industry and students is a focal point of my study from the student perspective, and how it informs the life-course, career transition and preparedness. The work of Heyley and Lee (2014: 348), which looks at the use of work experience to ‘enhance student employability’ and how HEIs ‘deploy various measures to grow and strengthen this activity’, exemplify this. Wilson (2012) and Witty (2013) advocate the potential impact successful EE can have through HEI/industry collaboration and particularly how real-world learning can develop employability skills, experience and to enhance a knowledge based economy (Wilson 2012). At a time when
KPIs such as Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) statistics (now the Graduate Outcomes Survey) are so important to reflect the success of a university, recognition of the invaluable role that HEIs play in this process, cannot be underestimated. The recent Augar Report (DBIS 2019) emphasises this again but also the importance of reforming and reviewing provision to ensure it is most effective in maximising employability in sectors which require certain knowledge, skills and experiences at graduate level. However, this is often complex, as Beaumont et al. (2016) demonstrate, whilst learners may perceive their employability skills are increasing as they progress through their undergraduate degree, they too feel pressured by external factors which they see as barriers to future careers. Competition, economy, location, reputation, quality of degree and associated qualifications were factors concerning learners as they considered careers post-graduation. This reflects the ‘diving board’ theory when learners express anxiety as they reach the end of their degrees, a crucial topic to explore with participants in my study regarding perspectives on their employability.

2.1.5 University perspective and my HEI setting

Universities must respond strategically and practically to pressures raised by the labour market on EE related policies (Fuller et al. 2011; Witty 2013). Universities have shared challenges at the meso level fuelled by macro stakeholder agendas on student recruitment, retention, satisfaction and related benchmarks (e.g. NSS DLHE). This exposes the convoluted relationship at different levels and the potential impact on the learner journey and student experience. My HEI’s position as a post-1992 university and the vocational nature of the undergraduate degree which my study is based on, is an important factor with added pressure to justify how the course enhances graduate employability.

Policy that initiated the removal of the binary line and the unification of HE into one system was a significant milestone (Brown 2011) and seen as a ‘momentous policy move’ (Kogan and Hanney 2000:109) from the original Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (Burke 2012) and fuelled by the Dearing Report (1997), (Fuller et al. 2011). Numerous initiatives flourish through strong networks between schools, colleges, universities and
related agencies (NAO 2008). Moore et al. (2013) reinforce this having been commissioned to review WP empirical research such as Chowdry et al. (2008; 2013), Crozier and Reay (2008), and Reay (2005; 2009) to inform the 2014 strategy. The breadth of degree subjects, attracting under-represented and non-traditional learners (Mann et al. 2014) raised employability to be a central focus for HEIs. These were concepts linked to wider dimensions of life-long and work-based learning (Tomlinson 2014). However, despite the positivity of post-1992 policy the remanence of the old regime is still apparent. As Shattock (2012) acknowledges, there is still evidence of segregation between the old (pre-1992) and new (post-1992) HEIs and this continues to prejudice the reputation of universities. Studies by Reay et al. (2001; 2005; 2009), Connor et al. (2004), and recently reinforced by Reay (2018), who explored minority ethnic students and class divide between traditional and modern HEIs, substantiate this. Smith (2007), who applied Bourdieu principles (1990), Grenfell (2004) and Boliver (2013) echo this and an emerging pattern of university stratification, indicating the two-tier system is still very much alive. Reay (2018:528) reiterates the ‘failure of the English Education system to provide anything like a level playing field’.

As my study focuses on a vocational undergraduate degree, Brockmann’s (2012; 2016) recognition of an academic/vocational divide is pertinent as is how HEIs can influence the learner’s transition/ life-course and aspirations, based on programmes offered. My HEI is tarred with a post-1992 reputation for opening its doors to the non-traditional, WP learners and attracting those reflecting certain inclusion typologies (Ainscow et al. 2006; Togerson et al. 2007; Booth and Ainscow 2011). Furthermore, my university is at risk of criticism from traditional academia for delivering more contemporary, vocationally-based degrees with courses predominately in the creative industries such as arts, media and leisure. Ultimately this HEI has stood firm in providing contemporary degrees, although it could be argued that it has no choice but to focus on vocational industries, as there are suggestions of an unspoken agreement between this former polytechnic and that of its prestigious, Russell Group, counterpart. Shattock (2010:20) considers the positives, and the need for ‘animal spirit’ in universities that are fighting for academic excellence whilst seeking alternatives and further reinforcing the continued external (macro) pressures faced by HEIs.
WP and a vocational focus have been embedded in my HEI due to its historical roots as a former polytechnic, with WP policy, the organisation and society (Mittler 2012) most likely nurturing it to what it is today. In comparison to pre-1992 counterparts steeped in history, reputation and sometimes off putting to those that do not quite fit (Archer et al. 2002; Smith 2007), my HEI arguably has the advantage of being less intimidating, a topic being explored through my study. Tomlinson (2014) proposes that challenging student assumptions, misconceptions and confusions surrounding the contemporary HEI environment is important to ensure high academic attainment and to meet macro stakeholder demands. The Augar Report (DBIS 2019) reaffirms this perspective. Unfortunately, despite attempts to broaden measures of HE (Shattock 2010), arbitrary national league tables fail to help the reputation of post-1992 HEIs, although the introduction of the TEF could change this. Nevertheless, it recognises another contradiction where the benefits of a modern, accessible HEI cannot compete with higher ranked HEIs (Chapleo 2006).

Contemporary subjects in leisure fields, like the focus for my study, cater for domestic and international students, helping break down barriers (Burke 2012) and targeting marginalised groups (Crawford and Greaves 2015; Bowes et al. 2015). Ainscow et al. (2006), Fraser (2009) and Moore et al. (2013) reiterate the importance of embracing inclusivity and social justice. (Adams et al. (2007) and Skubikowski et al. 2009) further support these principles whilst exploring it as both a process and a goal. However, changing WP policy has created a continual see-saw effect. McCaig (2016) exposes this contradictory rhetoric with the umbrella term of the Aimhigher programme, which initially solidified deeper social justice values (Doyle and Griffin 2012) before it was abolished it was then progressed again through New Labour policy from 1997-2010 (Ball and Junemann 2012). Wilkins and Burke (2015) refer to the ‘massification’ of HE, creating tensions, stemming from the dual goals and competing demands of social equity and economic incentive alongside trebling fees and changes in financial compensations (McCaig 2016). This exposes the complex web of contradictory agendas and the need to disentangle policy from practice.
As Singh (2011:481) describes, there are continually ‘challenging times’ within HE regarding WP and fuelled by ‘strategy ambiguities in the notion of social justice’. This turbulent economic climate (Dawson et al. 2013; Jackson 2013) shows no sign of stabilising, and with Russell Group universities looking to differentiate ‘outreach to meet their own needs’ (McCaig 2015:8) there are further concerns over equity, fairness and transparency, an issue examined previously by Bibbings (2006). Echoing Furlong et al. (2009), McCaig (2016) warns of the reversal of a decade of WP which worked hard to close the gap between the rich and poorer social classes. This conundrum between fair access and the pressure for graduates to contribute to wider global competitiveness (Hughes and Peasgood 2014) on the academic stage, fuels my study and the need to look beyond the rhetoric (Wilkins and Burke 2015) to explore the student (micro) perspective directly and the impact EE and related WP initiatives were having.

### 2.1.6 KPI Pressures and TEF

National pressures facing the UK government (Tomlinson 2014; Moore et al. 2013; Bowes et al. 2015) increasingly filter through at the meso/micro level. International places continue to be at risk with growing tensions on migration control, and government cuts affecting resources on the ground (McCaig 2015; 2016). This is a concern and reiterates how WP is not just about providing a welcome mat for all, but once enrolled in an HEI, there needs to be a solid, stable infrastructure, adequately resourced to support individuals through their learner journey and into successful graduate careers. Recent criticisms suggest that this is not always the case (Heyler and Lee 2014) and the Augar Report (DBIS 2019) reaffirms this. Brown (2011) refers to challenging external stimuli from government policy, professional bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and national level initiatives (often funding or research influenced), creating increasingly demanding KPIs with the NSS and DLHE being significant as a measure of HE success alongside ratings and league tables. There are also growing student consumer demands (Woodall et al. 2014; Tomlinson 2017), and what Nixon et al. (2018:927) refer to collectively as ‘her majesty’ reflecting narcissistic student behaviours, caused by the marketization affect.
Tight’s (2013) study of the removal of the binary divide and creation of post-1992 universities suggests that this has resulted in the subsequent pressures experienced by HEIs today.

WP is clearly one push factor, and by providing HE from the elite to the masses has exposed a host of social mobility implications and subsequent policy (Basit and Tomlinson 2012). To respond to this, Guansekara (2004:201) describes change in HE, from ‘a focus on teaching and research towards an enabling, partnership role with industry, government and communities’. This reaffirms collaboration as an evolving force, influenced by pull factors of the wider economy (Elton 1999; McCaffery 2010). This was acknowledged by Stensaker et al. (2012:1) referring to ‘supra-national’, ‘national’ and ‘institutional’ level competition. This has put further pressure on universities, which McCaig (2016) refers to as ‘market effect’ requiring HEIs to make mandates with partners such as Office for Fair Access (OFFA 2014;2015) and Higher Education and Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2011) on tuition fees, access and funding. There is a continued demand for quality assurance (Thair et al. 2006; Gibbs 2010; Rosa and Amaral 2012) through KPIs, rating improvements (Hazelkorn 2015), and subsequently, funding constraints (Sarrico 2010; Wilson 2012; Tomlinson 2014). The HEA’s launch of TEF (DBIS 2016) is a new pressure. Described as using dangerous algorithms and bizarre metrics (Ashwin 2016) including NSS and DLHE, it attempts to measure performance, quality and value for money which are synonymous with ratings/league tables, prestige and reputation (Gibbs 2017), yet ultimately determining future funding, status and competition. Exploring student perspectives in my study, and associated experiences is crucial to understand, inform and justify a graduate education.

Kezar (2009:19) exposes further problems, arguing that increasing KPIs and multiple initiatives, ‘destroy the capacity to implement meaningful change’. This is strengthened by Burnes et al. (2014:913) who maintain that this creates a culture of ‘greedy institutions, caring less and demanding more’. Obsessions with ratings, rankings and competition can result in ‘manipulation and gaming’ (Johnes 2016:77), impeding the ability to respond effectively to change. Tight’s (2013:11) reference to ‘institutional churn’ perhaps best
reflects this relentless turmoil to which HEIs have become accustomed and describes how universities regularly re-invent themselves to better face their changing circumstances. It is this churn that illustrates the state of flux for HEIs, and the difficulty in embracing change, when the ride never stops. HEI, departmental and managerial re-structuring is rife, whilst at micro level, haphazard and small-scale changes is witnessed in a bid to keep up. Kezar (2009:22) describes ‘knee jerk reactions’ where senior management are fearful of initiatives and frantic and dysfunctional in keeping up with the Jones (institutional isomorphism), and perhaps exposing how isolated and disparate they are from the front line. My study is important to help inform strategy but instead of reliance on statistics and calculative measures, it explores the student perspective and thereby enhances understanding of the impact of EE on the learner journey and subsequently aid the achievement of macro stakeholder agendas.

2.1.7 Vocational HE and adventure and outdoor industries

Vocational degrees, like my course, respond to the WP agenda in providing contemporary, work-based degrees (Moore et al. 2013). Unfortunately, courses which move away from traditional academic disciplines still have a stigma attached. This was not helped by critics of vocational growth in HE and the proliferation of new degrees described as a ‘forest fire out of control’ (Kelly 2001:381) and which arguably fuelled the scathing attack on ‘Mickey Mouse courses’ by a former HE Minster and which was leapt upon by the press (Hodge in BBC 2003). Whilst this was over a decade ago the term has tainted vocational courses (Richmond and Sanders 2014), doing little to build credibility within society and across the staunch academic traditionalists (Boliver 2013). The increase in tuition fees only fueled the criticism about value for money in terms of quality of educational experience and most importantly, career potential upon graduation (Heyler and Lee 2014; Beaumont et al. 2016). Most recently the Augar Report (DBIS 2019) reaffirmed this challenge.

Vocational degrees have been on the receiving end of interrogation over the last decade (Richmond and Sanders 2014), leaving the HEIs that provide them, and the students that graduate from them, with an uphill battle. Crozier and Reay (2008), Basit and Tomlinson
(2012), Tomlinson (2014), Wilkins and Burke (2015) and McCaig (2015) explore interrelated WP themes and the benefits of EE, providing evidence to build the reputation of non-traditional HE provisions and justifying unique opportunities vocationally focused degrees offer industry and career potential for the graduate. The study by Beaumont et al. (2016) about sport undergraduates echoed the same barriers that other vocational degrees have in justifying their existence and demonstrating the positive impact on employability. Transition theory as developed by Heinz and Kruger (2001) and Shildrick and McDonald (2006) is pertinent as it highlights the different stages of undergraduate development. For my study it focuses specifically on the impact of EE through visits, guest lectures, live projects, formal work placements and associated industry interactions and networking. Exploring real-world learning opportunities, synonymous with vocationally based disciplines, provides an opportunity to reveal benefits against the prejudices of less traditional academic disciplines, and whether graduates are more work ready to contribute to the global economy (DBIS 2016).

Exploring the history and evolution of undergraduate degrees in outdoor related fields, provides context to my study, allowing a better understanding of less traditional academic disciplines. The history of outdoor education and subsequent undergraduate provision dates from the late 1960s (Stott 2015). Research evolved with Barnes (2004: 21) exploring what goes into an outdoor education degree and asking the question ‘are we getting it right?’ Studies such as Dingle (2005) examined professional standards, indicating the need to take the industry more seriously. According to Stott (2015) there appears no formal or systematic approach to pedagogic practice in UK HE regarding this subject area, despite growth over the last fifty years and culminating today with UCAS statistics revealing 27 UK providers of HE programmes with outdoor or adventure in the title. However, Hickman and Collins’ (2014) statistics a year earlier raised concern as they previously recorded nearer 50 undergraduate courses and with an additional 70 in postgraduate courses, suggesting a possible decline or rationalisation to respond to market trend and again the sea-saw effect of conflicting government policy.
Varying course titles in this field suggests a diverse range of pedagogic approaches (Stott 2015). Prince (2005: 21) reinforces the importance of ‘tracking’ the learner journey through to graduation and career security yet exposing the dichotomy between theory and practice in undergraduate outdoor provision. Prince concludes there was an increasing relevance of employment and vocational activity (EE) in degree work but no trend to increase graduate level employment. Prince (2005:21) refers to the ‘circular argument’ recognising the need for development of technical skills and National Governing Body qualifications (NGBs) alongside professional experience. Priest and Gass (2005), Stott (2007), Kosseff (2010) and Gray et al. (2011) echo this, highlighting the importance of qualified outdoor leaders able to work in a variety of settings, using a mix of professional practices, technical and interpersonal skills and training. Humberstone and Brown (2006) acknowledge how partnerships between industry and HEIs provide synergy in developing academia and professionals in practice with Attarian (2015) continuing to reaffirm this balanced approach.

Munge’s (2009) study from the employer perspective, recognised the benefits of a vocational degree when recruiting employees, but only in the broader context of other skills, as well exposing inconsistencies between graduates and personal skill levels. Demands are changing in HE outdoor provision, reinforcing a blended approach of professional skills, knowledge and technical skills. Mullins (2014: 129) suggests there is a need for outdoor undergraduates to ‘know their industry/environment’ beyond NGB qualifications. Hickman and Stokes (2015:63) propose that outdoor leader education and training is being characterised by ‘procedural skills’ at the expense of ‘non-technical’ skills. Furthermore, they suggest a risk of HE outdoor programmes producing practitioners with potentially unsophisticated awareness of the more holistic environment, which may impede graduates to develop theory from practice and indicating the potential in EE activities. Hickman and Stokes (2016) advocate the benefits of graduates coming into the workplace with more breadth in real world skills and transferable employability skills relating to personal and social development, knowledge and experience. They argue that this provides a platform to express emergent concepts of professionalism and wider work-related themes such as values of social settings and ways of managing professional lives beyond graduation. Brooks and Youngson (2016:1563) support this notion, concluding
from their study of undergraduate career progression that placement students are ‘more likely to secure appropriate graduate-level work and higher starting salaries upon completion of their degree in comparison to non-placement students’.

Hickman and Collins (2014) highlight the benefits of reflective work practice and aiding continuous professional development (CPD). However, they also recognise the barriers faced by undergraduates relating to the unique practical nature of the programme and problems with ‘doing as opposed to thinking’. Mullins’ (2014) argument for an academic management degree to develop reflective practice in a working environment could be the solution. A concluding statement from Hickman and Stokes (2016:35) reinforces the continued battle that HEI providers and outdoor graduates have in satisfying conflicting stakeholder demands

many students perceived themselves to be in paradoxical positions, of being aspirant autonomous professionals who at the same time were being constrained from above by increased governmental and managerial demands, and from below by greater consumer accountability

Increasing use of EE activities and reflective practice suggests a positive way of responding to contrasting stakeholder demands. For example, Martin and Flemming (2010:41) conclude that ‘work integrated learning experience provided exposure and transition to the real-world’. Knowing that a graduate has a deeper knowledge and understanding of the organisation, combined with extended professional and personal development provides confidence that they can develop within the organisation (Watt 2008). Stott et al. (2014: 731) strengthen this in their study of ‘fresher to graduate’, describing that a high proportion of outdoor graduates achieved career success ‘by a combination of both self-conscious effort to maintain connections with their community of practice … along with a range of enhanced skills, knowledge and professional vocabulary developed as a result of doing the degree’. This demonstrates the positive impact that EE can have, and which is explored further through my study.
2.1.8 Diversity of the adventure and outdoor industry and implications for HE

The worldwide demand for adventure/extreme sport in addition to outdoor education reflects a far wider provision and with continued growth in the last decade (Ogilvie 2013). Sport England and the Outdoor Industry Association (2015:1) recognise 8.9 million people in the UK are active outdoors and describing it as having ‘huge potential’. Skills Active (2016) refer to the sector as being rich, diverse and ‘gaining strength’. The globalisation of the industry has extended provision further with the Adventure Travel Trade Association (2012) describing 65% accelerated growth in the market at a yearly rate since 2009 and valuing the global outbound adventure travel sector at £156 billion, alongside an estimated £50 billion in gear, clothing and accessories. This recognises the knock-on effect to related industries such as the retail sector. Pragma (2015) recorded £1433 million in sales of outdoor retail clothing, equipment and footwear in 2013 in the UK alone, further reinforcing the ATTA’s statistics and highlighting trends such as ‘staycations’ and the ‘festivals’ market in broadening the attraction of the outdoors. This exposes the diverse career opportunities for outdoor/adventure graduates today and supporting HE outdoor programmes which offer academic and professional skills beyond the traditional outdoor education/instructor.

Continued growth in the commercialisation of the sector, predicted by Loynes (1998) through the “Adventure in a Bun” concept and explored further by Beames and Varley (2013) and Beames and Brown (2014:77) regarding the ‘Disneyization of adventure’, it is important now for HE degrees to offer transferable skills such as business, management, finance, marketing/sponsorship, HR management and operations. This is reinforced by Allin and West (2015:159), who describe ‘boundaryless career’ opportunities within the outdoor industry and where potential is based far more on individual graduate ‘marketability’. This justifies my study to maximise this marketability by exploring student perspective on EE activities to aid understanding on what makes effective industry/HEI collaborations, for mutual stakeholder benefits from the micro perspective (of the learner journey) through to macro political agendas.
2.2 Emergent themes: Learner life-course/journeys

Lifelong learning, work-based learning and research associated with life transitions and the learner journey has become an increasingly prominent discourse (Leicester 2011). With the growing recognition of the ‘dynamic interaction between education, the economy, and the state’ (Tomlinson 2013:1), the strength of research in this field is undeniable. It is apparent that UK government, educational institutions and industry have their own lifelong learning perspectives, eventually impacting the learners themselves who seek personal and professional development to progress career and life aspirations to find a place in society. Chapman and Aspin (1997) refer to as the triadic nature of lifelong learning and the need for individuals to embrace personal fulfilment, inclusiveness and democratic understanding. These concepts are integral to my study to explore how EE collaboration impact personally, such as the development of soft employability skills (confidence, communication, teamwork) and professionally (gaining essential operational and management knowledge and experience to apply to industry) as learners’ transition to graduation.

The learner perspective is the focus of my study, yet macro/meso stakeholders permeate throughout due to complex multi-dimensional features. This introduces Bourdieusian principles (1990; 1993) and how concepts associated with learner agency may be influenced by habitus, the structures integral to a learner’s life and the fields in which they are placed. Each stakeholder has implications for the learner and these institutional (structural) forces (Raffe 2008) influence the foundations of a learner’s journey and related transitions (Shildrick and MacDonald 2007) the life-course concept (Heinz and Kruger 2001; Heinz 2009) and challenges faced within conflicting social, cultural and economic contexts. These interconnecting concepts are now explored in more detail.

2.2.1 Learner transitions and the life course

There has been a growing academic interest in transitions and differentiated outcomes for learners. As Kendall et al. (2018: 47) state, transitions are a ‘complex phenomenon’; or
more simply ‘a spectrum of experiences’ further confused by the influence of field and habitus. Numerous studies have reaffirmed the de-standardisation of the life-course, recognising non-linear pathways and blurring of distinct life phases from youth to adulthood (Shildrick and Macdonald (2007). This was further reinforced by Cote and Bynner (2008:251) who recognised the exclusion processes in education and the workplace and how this can ‘prevent some young people from certain socio-economic contexts from development process’ to emerging adults. Goodwin and O’Connor (2009) note that a learner life-course does not follow smooth, linear trajectories as previously predicted, and as Roberts (2011:21) indicates, where youth transition is now beyond ‘NEET and tidy pathways’ and that the ‘missing middle’ falls between the lines of this dualism. Reay’s (2018) most recent work reaffirms that almost a decade later for most working class young people, HE transitions and experiences within it, are still very different.

Ashton and Field’s (1976) early work provided observation and predictions about continuity in young workers’ experiences at home, school, and social class, shaping their experiences of work transitions, trajectories and subsequent careers. They introduced the concept of ‘careerless’, ‘short term careers’ and the ‘extended career’ to capture different perspectives which were dependent on background and experiences. Patterns of transition are diverse and unpredictable, with WP and inclusivity key factors within HE. Since the 1980s, stronger values on education for all (Barton 2003) has resulted in diversified transitions beyond the traditional narrowness of the school-to-work concept and emerging adulthood (Bynner 2005). Fuller’s work (2007) indicates this shift, where exploration into mid-life transitions of mature students revealed how a multi-level approach to HE is required to cater for non-traditional learners, drawing on differing qualifications, changing labour markets, and relationships between the individual and society. For my study, it is beneficial to see whether these factors are influential to participants, and whether this affects previous transitions pre-university, as well as current and future progression.

Transitions have become protracted and youth and adulthood cannot be thought of as distinct phases (Cohen and Ainley 2000) as Kohl (2007:253) describes ‘the erosion of the institutionalised life-course and the structural anchors that keep it in place’. Previously Jeff
Chapter 2

and Smith (1998) had referred to an imagined mainstream or factory conveyor belt approach to the life-course where trajectories of young people go neatly forward in a controlled, methodical manner. The works of Robinson and Aronica (2009; 2015) and Robinson (2011; 2013) resonate with this and changing education paradigms, magnifying the powerful influence of the triadic life-course. Shildrick and MacDonald’s (2007) research exposed some of the changes in pathways indicated by Robinson (2011; 2013) and influenced by the plethora of courses and qualifications that 21st century lifelong-learning offers, reflective of contemporary vocational undergraduate degrees, as featured in my study.

Raffe (2008) explored transitions from an institutional, structural perspective in shaping young people’s education to work transition, and the associated welfare and family structures previously highlighted by Ashton and Field (1976) and Wills (1977) and further by Banks et al. (1992). Research explored young people’s decision-making, identities and patterns of transition in four labour market regions in the late 1980s describing the effects of socialisation and how transitions were determined by factors such as educational attainment and class background, with transitions protracted or accelerated, dependent on circumstances. In my study, this undercurrent of socialisation, class and education is necessary to explore as part of participant decision-making.

Numerous other youth/education transitions studies have reaffirmed generic patterns highlighting challenges faced by young people considering HE. Briggs et al. (2012) examined the complex liaison, with family, school, careers advisors and HEIs for students to transition to appropriate courses, as well as post-enrolment experiences in settling into university life. Bowles et al. (2014:217) took this further identifying two groups of ‘enabling factors’, university influences such as administration, organisation, resources, staff and university attachment (a sense of belonging). Secondly they highlighted ‘student factors’ such as motivation, effort, social expectations, which have the power to support or inhibit a student’s transition in HE. Barber and Netherton (2018:600) reinforce this in a recent study, describing the ‘pivotal role’ vocational teachers have in aiding HE transition and building self-belief. Brooman and Darwent’s (2014:1523) share similarity regarding
transition enablers in first year students, measuring self-efficacy, autonomous learning and social integration in university life. Outcomes were mixed, concluding that a ‘scattergun approach’ to transitions should be avoided. These enabling factors are pertinent to my study and the experience of participants over their three-year degree, as well as considering background influences in pre-HE decision-making and factors affecting career progression.

Gale and Parker’s (2014) review of student typologies in HE clarifies the complexities of transition theory, breaking them into three literary conceptions covering induction, development and becoming. This implies an evolving process but might not be the case for students who never reach the established stage. For the purposes of my study EE falls into all three concepts with opportunities beginning as part of the welcome week with field trips and guest speakers. However, Gale and Parker (2014) argue that becoming offers the most theoretically sophisticated and student sympathetic account yet was the least prevalent and well understood. They conclude that induction and development activities were more easily analysed whereas becoming appears a less tangible proposition. They also reaffirm the multi-layered approach to such concepts:

we do not claim absolute distinction between these categories; they are not rigid and inflexible, but relatively permeable and fluid, reflecting the diversity of thought. One view of transition may not fit neatly into any one of the three categories, but may demonstrate some characteristics of either of the other two (Gale and Parker 2014:735)

They argue that future research in the field needs to ‘foreground students’ lived realities’, and that the theoretical and empirical base should be broadened, ‘if students’ capabilities to navigate change are to be fully understood and resourced’ (Gale and Parker 2014:734). This is beneficial to my study as I explore student experiences, their learner journey and life-course transitions through EE concepts and with participants from vocational and non-traditional backgrounds specifically. Gill’s (2019) outcomes from a recent study of sport science undergraduates is also useful to consider for my own study. Challenges with progressing to an academic environment from vocational education and training (VET), the
personal and professional development that results, and the expectations and diversity of experiences when transitioning are key factors which inform my research discussion.

2.2.2 Horizons for action/ careereship theory and decision-making

Transitions are not linear (Christodoulou 2016) and early research by Hodkinson et al. (1996) established this perspective when they explored young people’s career decision-making and transitions through a government funded training scheme. In the study by Hodkinson et al. (1996) interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders (including the young people, teachers, careers advisors, employers etc), and reaffirmed that serendipitous events were intertwined with other aspects of life. This reflects Hodkinson’s later work (2008), and specifically the horizons for action concept, which evolved from careership theory (Hodkinson et al. 1996; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Avis et al. 1998; Hodkinson 1998). The concept considers what is in the learner’s reach, and what factors can hinder, limit and determine their life path and career. As Hodkinson (2008:2) reflects, it provides a way of understanding careereship that is ‘more than simply the accumulation of practitioner experience or the blending together of idiosyncratic stories’. Policy and practice are informed by such theory reinforcing the triadic, multi-dimensional influences of lifelong learning. Hodkinson criticises macro stakeholder reliance on the many assumptions reflected in careereship theory and which do not necessarily take account of the multiple factors or trajectories, fuelled by each individual learner and their position in society. These assumptions suggest career decision-making is rational, process driven, linear and straightforward, culminating in a clear logical outcome. However, Hodkinson (2008) argues that in evaluating career theories, we need to know how well they fit with real life.

Careership theory in my study focuses on the decision-making which took place through the interactions of the learner and the fields they inhabit, and this is where the horizon metaphor is applied along with Bourdieu’s concepts of the influence of the world in and around each learner. Hodkinson (2008) argues that career decision-making is bounded by a person’s horizon for action or vision. However, each learner is limited by the position they
stand in and what is visible to the individual. The learner is prevented from seeing ‘what lies beyond’ (Hodkinson 2008:4). Existing career theories acknowledge the limitations imposed by the world outside each individual and, by the nature of the fields in which they are positioned (Bourdieu 1990; 1993). Recent works from Shield and Masardo (2018) expose the challenges faced by learners to meet or exceed expectations and problems are magnified when social status, class and other factors relating to non-traditional learners are highlighted. Through quantitative analysis of HE outcomes, it concluded that probability for a first or upper second decreased strongly for students that had transitioned into HE with vocational qualifications. However, it has been recognised that there are a wide range of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that can influence a learner’s success, and these are considered in my study.

Hodkinson (2008:2) describes that central to Bourdieu’s field theory is an understanding that ‘social environments are dynamic, complex and made up of interacting and unequal forces’. EE activities within an HEI environment involve complex interactions between macro stakeholders whilst responding to the pervasive influences of social structure (class, gender, ethnicity, age) and wider national/international politics and policies, associated economic climates, and globalisation. These forces are relational and the learner making a career decision or developing a career is an integral part of that field. The group selected for my study are reflective of such a field, as undergraduate students on a vocational degree in a post-1992 HEI and mostly non-traditional learners, often progress from a WP background and as a first generation HE student.

Through my investigation it is possible to explore each learners’ actions and dispositions and how it contributes to the on-going formation and reformation of the field in which they are positioned, and their future career and life-course progression as highlighted by Bathmaker et al. (2013). This has been highlighted more recently through Katartzi and Hayward (2019:1) who explored HE transitions from vocational qualifications and how there is a ‘misrecognition of their worth’ which influenced their original decision-making and their ongoing learner journey into HE. This exemplifies what Hodkinson et al. (1996) had originally exposed, regarding factors within the learner fields with the potential to help
(the triumph) or hinder (the tears), of a young person’s career decision-making and subsequent transitions. Studies such as Shildrick and Macdonald (2007), Kohli (2007) and Gale and Parker (2014) strengthen this, showing similar issues, which only scratch the surface of tangible barriers and less tangible aspects of learning culture and the relationship between the learner and society. Moreover, what Katartzi and Hayward (2019:7) describe as ‘transitional friction’ that vocational learners experience throughout their journey.

2.2.3 Learning cultures, identity, habitus, structure and agency

Theory associated with habitus, structure and agency is prominent in life-course research (Costa et al. 2019). Originally established through the works of Bourdieu, and the aforementioned field theory (1990; 1993), researchers such as Giddens (1991) have taken these principles, shifting from economic and social forces and processes relating to training and/or employment (social reproduction) to individual decision-making and life course planning, reflecting a more biographical reproduction in the context of opportunities and institutional regulations (Heinz 2009). Giddens’ (1991) perspective is underpinned by Bourdieu’s original work (1990; 1993) and how structure reflects both material and symbolic dimensions but also acknowledging differing perspectives on the structure/agency relationship. In my study structure at the macro level includes the influence of government policy, employers and HEIs, and the impact of tangible factors such as location, university ratings, Russell group status, KPIs, tuition fees and employment opportunities. Symbolic factors are also relevant to my study. These include HEI reputation, pre/post1992 cultures, traditional vs vocational provision and associated dualism, accessibility, inclusivity, WP philosophies and values, (Macfarlane 2014), and the influence on learner agency, if any.

Bourdieu’s (1990) multi-layered and often ambiguous terms of structure, habitus and agency are relevant to my research, as a learner’s decision-making can be powered by subconscious values and patterns of thinking (cultural capital) and, which manifests in their social status, class, and the structural institutions in which they are placed. Habitus is integral to my study, understood as a body of conscious and tacit knowledge of how to
journey through life (and the wider world) giving rise to differing tastes, opinion, mannerisms and conversational style; a portfolio of dispositions, symbolic to all aspects (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Habitus is ‘vital to our understanding of how dispositions affect behaviour’ (Edgerton and Roberts 2014: 214) and this is key to my study to understand the influence of macro policy and strategy from the learner perspective.

Influences growing up in a particular family and with shared sensibility and values with certain groups of friends can help or hinder decision-making (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). Therefore, my study explores these factors and whether they influence progression to a vocational degree at a post-92 HEI. An overlapping of social capital and habitus allows people to compete in a symbolic market-place, vying as individuals and as members of a group or class for prestige, distinction and power; what is natural, what is best. In the HE environment this is reinforced by the work of Macfarlane (2014) and the multidimensional relationships with structure, dualism and the conflict of old HE and traditional disciplines, pertinent to my study and enabling patterns to be explored through the lens of one selected group. Furthermore, Giddens’ (1991) reflexivity approach informs my study as it proposes that an individual’s reflexive actions, identities and intentions could have a transformative impact on their life-course and the cultures they are immersed in, and these are factors relevant to my aim and objectives. Giddens’ (1991) reflexivity approach has been supported more recently by Christodoulou’s (2016) work on vocational life transitions in adolescents advocating that biographical reflexivity is crucial in responding to habitus and decision-making. However, as stated by Costa et al. (2019: 21), ‘uncovering habitus is not a straightforward task’ and there are multiple layers associated with learning culture, identity and associated concepts.

Learning cultures and identities are undeniably powerful within the HE arena and inform transitional concepts (Hodkinson et al. 2007). Together they have the power to fuel learner aspirations which are complex and often contradictory (Archer 2010; 2014). Learner career research undertaken by Crossan et al. (2003) further highlights just how fragile, contingent and vulnerable, learner identities are to external changes, and how they can further manifest in hostility to education, as well as some denial of responsibility even for the most
enthusiastic learners. Turner and Tobell (2018), more than a decade later, continue to show how challenging the reconciliation of identities are during educational transitions and subsequent individual trajectories. They argue the need for enabling systems and practices which acknowledge differences and support changing identities. The participants in my study share a non-traditional culture, so similarities and differences are explored as they progress their journey. Based within an HEI which fits the expected mould for embracing inclusivity and offering vocational opportunities, it was imperative to explore whether these systems and practices were already in place. Questions surrounding underlying learning cultures and associated decision-making were important to explore and whether this was positive or detrimental to their progress. This reflects the approach by James et al. (2015:4) who concluded that when immersed in new fields, students can develop strategies and nuanced understandings of their previous experiences, social background and different learning cultures and contexts to inform the development of their learner identities.

Family background, social-class, education, friendships and peer groups are factors of habitus and research continues to reaffirm the influence that these structures have on decision-making and subsequent learner trajectories of a young person. Gorard and Smith (2007) highlight potential barriers to participation in HE from birth to undergraduate and recognise inequalities between socio-economic groups evident early in life and remaining important through school life. This includes whether to participate in HE, and whilst they suggest some barriers were marginal, their findings confirm previous issues regarding working-class and middle-class access to HE. Brooks’ (2003) findings suggest that not only are there significant differences between working and middle-class perspectives on HE accessibility and availability but also within each class.

Brooks’ (2003) recognition of a two-step interaction between family and friends in the decision-making progress is considered in my study, where backgrounds varied but include mostly first generation working-class students. Reay et al. (2010) researched similar students, embracing a sociological perspective of both social and academic aspects. Their study looked at learner identity and how students are positioned in relation to their discipline, peer group and wider university. Findings suggest that differences in HEIs are
conceptualised in terms of institutional habitus, reflective of HE dualism as recognised by Macfarlane (2015). This is directly related to my study as participants are based in a post-1992 HEI studying a contemporary, vocationally based degree. Ultimately the message from Reay et al. (2010:107) further reinforces Bourdieu’s work on habitus, and the issues regarding ‘fitting in or standing out’ and the difficulties faced by working class students attempting to succeed in elite universities.

2.2.4 Vocational habitus

Research by Colley et al. (2003:471) is particularly relevant to my study about learner identities. Focusing on vocational education they argue that ‘learning is a process of becoming’ and that learning and vocational cultures have the potential to ‘transform those who enter them’. This has been highlighted recently by Kendall et al. (2018) who, when exploring FE to HE, see transitions as a social process. The concept of vocational habitus explains a central aspect of student experiences which link more closely with the impact and influence of engaging with EE activities. Whilst acknowledging pre-dispositions previously discussed through works such as Bourdieu (1990; 1993), Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) and Brooks (2003), Colley et al. (2003) propose that vocational habitus involves having to orient a further set of dispositions which are work related and both ‘idealised and realised’, reflecting the horizons for action principle. Here vocational habitus reinforces previous dispositions but also helps develop them in line with the demands of the work-place. However, as Lehmann and Taylor (2015) warn, assumptions should not be made that all non-traditional, working-class learners, should be directed to vocationally based education and experiences like apprenticeships. Instead they highlight further the complexity of multiple layers and that a closer consideration between field and habitus are needed. This also reflects the outcomes of Web et al. (2017) who suggest that whilst the Bourdieusian concepts have aided WP research, understanding and tools for analysis, extensions to his legacy and a more practice-based approach could respond more effectively to the nuances and complex social inequalities in HE.
For my study, exploring vocational habitus in relation to my participants is important to understand these complex layers in decision-making pre-HE and the impact of EE activities during their journey. It is also crucial to see what influence vocational opportunities have had and whether EE and real-world experiences have impacted on each learner’s subsequent trajectories and preparedness for future career progression (Bathmaker et al. 2013). This is important both from a practical and emotional perspective and to expose any positive or negative sensibilities which may exist. This is further reinforced by Jones et al. (2015:1) who explored, through Bourdieu’s lens, over 1000 young people’s testimonies relating to work experience placements. Appearing to echo principles of vocational habitus, they note how different capitals are detected, distributed and observed: ‘emerging through young people’s perceptions of employer engagement is a complex web of human, social and cultural capital accumulation’. They suggest that overlaps are frequent and that newly acquired forms of capital often activate others, whilst suggesting that the cyclical nature of EE gains, has the potential to accumulate benefits exponentially for some young people, whilst leaving others in less favourable positions and detached from capitals that are important for labour market success.

2.3 Summary conclusion to the literature review and conceptual framework

The literature is not exhaustive but allowed a structure to be created pictorially, identifying existing conceptual and theoretical perspectives and the relationships between associated primary and emerging topics. From this review I established a conceptual framework (Figure 2.4) identifying EE and the student experience as the fundamental basis (and overarching themes), with emergent key themes associated with the learner journey. Overarching themes are multifaceted, multi-dimensional, and consciously and subconsciously influence and are influenced by each learner’s world. The learner life-course and associated transitions, trajectories and careership, have become integral to my study and provides an effective connection with EE, the student perspective, and themes associated with WP, inclusivity and vocational learning. The influence of macro stakeholders in the relationships at meso/micro level are also highly influential and it was important to recognise the connections.
Recent work by Petrov et al. (2016) exposes the multi-layered factors associated with my study. Researching workforce development and engagement, they categorise an upper group to define the specific activity (or EE opportunity) covering the strategic fit and partners involved (HEI, industry, government) with the appropriate learning package. Meanwhile, the lower group of factors were based on engagement support, such as the right staff, culture and systems, and finance to sustain the venture. For EE this reflects the meso/micro levels, delivered by the HEIs, individual industry partnerships to aid the learner journey. Petrov et al. (2016) argue that these upper/lower (macro/micro) themes must be connected and facilitated with strong leadership to sustain meaningful workforce engagement and reinforcing the importance of a collaborative approach which responds to all stakeholders. Through my study I am able to explore these perspectives at the micro level and from the student perspective directly to help inform future collaborations.
Chapter 3  Methodology

3.1  Research structure and timeline

The research design is presented in Figure 3.1, inspired from Thomas’s (2013) recommendation for the use of illustrations to aid the process. This provided a structured, yet flexible research design model (Robson 2011) which evolved as literature was explored. It further illuminates how the literature, and conceptual framework, informed the research questions, objectives, and methodology and research paradigm. The study focused on the student perspective which was central and influenced ontological and epistemological philosophies and subsequently the methodology selected (Barbour 2008).

3.2  Research paradigm

I adopted a sociological and anthropological approach (Punch 2009) for my study dealing with an interpretation of events, opinions and perceptions surrounding educational experiences reflecting a journey of ‘discovery as opposed to proof’ (Maykut and Morhouse 1994:21). My paradigm maintains that there is no one truth or direction, instead, observations of the world provide indirect indications of phenomena interpreted to develop knowledge (Arthur et al. 2012). I chose to embrace an inductive exploration to the research questions and the ontological perspective that there are ‘multiple kinds of being’ (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). This reflects Fuchs’ (1992:141) view where ‘diversity, individualism and cosmopolitan openness are valued more than rigid scientific controls’. The epistemology was interpretive favouring ethnographic characteristics as opposed to traditional, positivist techniques (Robson 2011). However, whilst I acknowledged that I was immersed in the study as a practitioner, exploring my own students, my role was somewhat removed. Therefore, the approach was somewhat phenomenological. As the researcher (and practitioner) I was able to investigate participants (my students) in making sense of their experiences to a specific concept or phenomena (Cottrell and McKenzie 2011).
Constructivism was also relevant as it involves individuals seeking understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell 2013) with the goal focusing on the participants’ views on the situation (EE). The study was a holistic journey (Maykut and Morhouse 1994) positioned within a phenomenological framework where an inductive
approach encourages multiple outcomes (Ary et al. 2014) to understand social phenomena (Yanow Schwartz-Shea 2006). Hollway and Jefferson (2003) refer to this inductive approach as the ‘what’ and ‘why’, exploring meaning and experiences in context. I adopted the view of Lapan et al. (2012:8), recognising there is no single universal reality apart from human perceptions of the ‘notions of uniqueness’ within qualitative research. By utilising qualitative strategies, and with greater emphasis on interaction as to how individuals construct their worlds, my role in the study reflected Thorpe and Moscarola’s (1991:130) description as ‘akin to that of an explorer, discovering new and interesting paths’. I was engaged in an ‘exploration of the unknown’ (Maykut and Moorhouse’s 1994:21) looking for patterns which might emerge specific to the context. I was studying a snapshot’ (Smith 2007:423) or as Hatch (2002:3) offers, ‘a slice of life’.

Despite my inductive paradigm avoiding pre-conceived ideas, an initial literature review was important to establish parameters. Hart (2001: 3) describes this as ‘topic’ literature, whilst ‘methodological’ literature informs the research process more holistically. Whilst qualitative research allows themes to emerge, it is still important to utilise existing literature to provide background and rationale (Cottrell and McKenzie 2011; Flick 2014). From the literature I established a conceptual framework to underpin the research and as Kumar (2014) suggests, to provide clarity and focus. Studies into learner journeys, de-standardisation of the life-course and the unpredictability of transitions and learner trajectories (discussed in Chapter 2), strengthen the interpretive, inductive approach. This is reinforced by studies such as Hodkinson and Issit (1994), Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000), Fuller, (2007), and Brockmann (2012), where interpretive paradigms and qualitative methodologies such as interviews, focus groups and observations were undertaken to glean enriched data.

Associated topics including student satisfaction, performance and the impact of EE were also relevant to my study and the literature represented a range of research paradigms and methodologies. This included more positivist, quantitative approaches involving large scale survey data, and related statistics which allow opportunities for comparability and generalisability with robust and measurable outcomes. The wealth of publications
produced by the HE Statistics Agency yearly, on staff, student and business/community
issues demonstrate this (Nixon et al. 2006). However, quantifiable methods can be limited
as it is difficult to measure the diversity of EE (Lester and Costley 2010) and associated
collaboration arrangements (Williamson et al. 2013). EE initiatives are often unique in HE,
dependent on employers in the locality and engagement they are willing to offer (Bolden et al. 2009). This justified an interpretive approach for my study, particularly as it focused on
one cohort on a specific vocational degree. Limitations in generalisability are accepted for
qualitative methods (Robson 2011) but in depth, enriched exploration (Barbour 2008;
Denzin and Lincoln 2011) of learner reflections, was preferred to offer a valuable
contribution in gaining a better understanding of EE within a natural setting.

A careful balance was needed when considering which research approach to adopt.
Hellawell (2006:487) encapsulated this, referring to ‘empathy and alienation’ being useful
qualities for the researcher and reflecting more broadly the challenges of ‘reciprocal
distrust’ (Merton 1972:100) which still exist between opposing paradigms/methodology.
My approach removed rigid, evaluative and strategic pressures, but brought the risk of
challenge or rejection of outcomes, in some educational and research environments due to
lack of generalisability and therefore questions regarding worth and authenticity.

3.3  Generalisability in the research

Debate continues regarding generalisability which is case study based or specific to one
group or cohort (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985; Flyvbjerg 2004), and it was important that
I recognised these challenges. Whilst I do not see my research as case study research, the
principles of case study were relevant as a small scale study (Simons 2009). Stake (1995:1)
proposes that any case in education usually relates to people and programmes and ‘we are
interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality’. Case study or small group
research has a poor basis for generalisation, although there is an opportunity, where data
has regular occurrences. Stake (1995:1) refers to this as ‘petite generalizations’
acknowledging the limitations but recognising possibility. In contrast, Yin (2014:9)
suggests that the academic community oppose this idea due to the ‘lack of rigour’. Bassey
though is positive about ‘fuzzy generalizations’ where primary data from a small sample make it unrealistic to draw together robust conclusions that are representative on a bigger scale.

Poor generalisability was a threat to this study as it involved one group of students, but it was possible to respond to these challenges. Flyvbjerg talks of ‘five misunderstandings’ (2004) about generalisability of qualitative research and Simons (1996) identifies the paradox of a small, focused study, being both unique, and universal, demonstrating the ability to manage expectations realistically. Thomas (2010:21) supports the ‘uniqueness’ of a case or small group study stating that it does not have to be about ‘causation’. This was pertinent to my study, as I was not attempting to evaluate or test a hypothesis; instead I embraced the concept of producing a rich picture using Bassey’s (1999) idea of storytelling and capturing different insights of the participants.

With one group for this study it is inevitable that positivist critics may challenge worth, trustworthiness and trust-seeking, in the absence of scientific reliability, validity and quantifiable evidence (Robson 2011). However, this is not a new battle, and has continued since the evolution of post positivist approaches over sixty years ago, alongside complexities of exploring tacit knowledge (Kemmis 1980). Nevertheless, it was important not to simply deflect with weak arguments, such as generalization is not the goal (Denzin 1983). Instead I applied, Guba’s four criteria solution (Shenton 2004: 64) to my study: I argue that the collation of enriched, in-depth evidence reinforced ‘credibility’ (in place of internal validity), whilst ‘transferability’ could be achieved by comparing findings with similar vocational degrees, instead of generalisability or external validity. This further supported Guba’s notion of ‘dependability’ (in preference to reliability) and ‘confirmability’ as opposed to objectivity by recognising the limitations, parameters and realistic potential for sharing results with HEIs and courses with similar characteristics. This is underpinned by Guba and Lincoln’s (1981:62) concept of ‘fittingness’ and Goetz and LeCompte’s (1984) exploration of comparability and translatability providing robustness to the approach. Similarly, Stake’s (1995:8) concept of ‘particularization’ emphasises how the study of one group, allows depth and uniqueness; and as Punch (2009)
asserts, there is an importance in understanding one group in its complexity and entirety, reinforcing Geertz’s (1973) earlier concept of a thick description.

3.4 Positionality

My research values, belief and axiology have undoubtedly been informed by my own personal and professional experiences. Furthermore, this fuelled my own passion and interest in exploring EE in relation to the course that I am directly responsible for. The themes discussed in Chapter 2 regarding non-traditional learners, post-1992 provision, WP/inclusivity and vocational HE have shaped the conceptual structure of the study and thus exposes the research to criticality and challenge, including ethical implications of the research (Hammersley and Traianou 2012).

Self-reflexivity strengthened the approach by enabling transparent recognition of myself and my positionality as an insider. Threats could be transformed into opportunities as I was able to use the benefits of my professional role to interact closely with students to explore their perspectives within an established relationship. Furthermore, as an insider I could enjoy time with and access to the participants. My role as an insider risked bias and subjectivity so I had to be open and honest in responding transparently to the associated sensitivities of this (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). It was important for me to consider my modus operandi (Oliver 2010). For instance, did the title and associated questions evolve naturally and objectively, or did my own choice of lens (Punch and Oancea 2014), subconsciously or consciously (Hawkins 2006), influence the chosen research paradigm? On reflection I accept Scotland’s (2012:14) perspective that there is no such thing as objectivity or neutrality in educational research; ‘what knowledge is, and ways of discovering it, are subjective’. The need to accept this was important so I could establish transparency, authenticity and to embrace associated research virtues (MacFarlane 2009).

It became increasingly apparent that my vocational career path has much to do with the beliefs and values that I now hold. Having progressed through undergraduate and MA
study part-time (as a mature student) studying alongside employment, my core values are built on the foundations of my own positive vocational learner journey and accompanying EE activities. Furthermore, I was a non-traditional learner as defined in my study, coming from a tiny comprehensive school in a rural county, a working class background and first generation in my family to go to university; I arguably defied the odds, or exceeded my expected horizons for action and did so through a vocational HE experience. It was almost inevitable that my passions and vales would become prominent in my own research. This demonstrates how positionality is born from our unique social identities and individual experiences (Jones et al. 2014). My values and beliefs are inextricably linked therefore researching the vocational degree that I now lead on, allowed me to evidence the positives that I had experienced and strengthen the course reputation. It was important that this bias was transparent as there is a moral obligation to be critical of subjectivity (Cousin 2010). My preconceived ideas and axiology, or meta-ethics (Gregory 2003), allude to the benefits of EE delivered through vocational degrees, to provide successful career paths. Therefore, it was important to limit – or reflect upon - any influence this may have. As an insider I had a subliminal power both as an employee of the HEI where the study was conducted, and with direct authority in the practitioner/ participant (student) relationship. Exposing my beliefs and associated meta-ethics transparently, and accepting the potential influence, strengthened the robustness and trustworthiness of the research design (Shenton 2004), enabling a transparent methodology. As Bourke (2014:1) reminds us: ‘our own biases shape the research process, serving as checkpoints along the way’.

On reflection, I can also see how original ideas for my EdD study also stemmed from values I place on the student voice. Through self-reflexivity in the research process I have been able to acknowledge my personal frustrations at government rhetoric and associated publications and statistics regarding the benefits of EE in HE and how this inspired me to explore an alternative perspective. Whilst I wholeheartedly support the principles of EE, my underpinning philosophical assumptions are, that research in this area tends to be more positivist and heavily weighted from a strategic government/HE/employer perspective. In contrast, those that it affects ie the learners, appear to have less of a voice (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith 2015). Whilst I appreciate the importance for HEIs and employers to collaborate strategically to achieve wider economic government directives my own core values as a professional, lecturer and personally, lay foremost with the student and
therefore the research framework and positionality was aligned to this. Often lost in a sea of policy, the values I impressed on this study, focused on the learner journey from fresher to graduate, examining what I believed to be the positive impact of EE activities on each learners’ career prospects. Whilst government, employers and HEIs spout the importance of EE, I wanted to know about the learner; is it good for them and is it as good as the rhetoric suggests? I know my vocational educational experiences were invaluable in the learner journey I have made but this was a chance to explore my own students perspectives and in a way that was transparent, honest and open throughout the process.

### 3.5 The HEI cohort (sample and sampling frame)

The focus of one group enabled in-depth analysis of learners in a real-world contemporary study with clear research boundaries (Yin 2014). A longitudinal study was originally considered (Cohen et al. 2011), focusing on first year (Level 4), through to graduation at Level 6. Hayes (2009) describes this as freezing the frame over a specified time period enabling informed reflection and analysis on specific issues (EE) surrounding a particular case (the cohort). Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the EdD, a longitudinal study was not feasible. However, I pursued my longitudinal interest with Level 6 students being the focal point of primary data collection through their reflection across their three-year undergraduate experience.

This cohort was selected due to its relevance, appropriateness and practitioner accessibility in exploring the impact of EE from student perspectives (Thomas 2010; Robson 2011) and implications of vocational HE (within a post-92 HEI), catering for non-traditional students and addressing WP and inclusivity. As my study was on a small-scale group it was not seeking to be representative (Thomas 2010) of the same or similar undergraduate degrees UK wide. Therefore, the traditional considerations of more deductive, positivist approaches such as justified sample size or framing techniques to be representative and generalisable to the population (Robson 2011) were not applicable.
3.6 Methods

Focus groups and interviews were the methods for primary data collection and provided the interpretative, narrative evidence that the research design, philosophy, paradigm and methodologies required.

3.6.1 Focus Groups

I chose to conduct focus groups at the start of the group’s final Level 6 year to allow EE and learner life-course topics to be introduced through discussion, and to encourage reflection on their previous two years and journey to date. Undertaking focus groups prior to interviews enabled themes to be raised for later examination more deeply in a one-to-one setting (Kumar 2014). Focus groups are recognised as enhancing and complimenting the individual interview (Flick 2014), providing a creative and specialised method of interacting with groups of people (Kreuga and Casey 2015) yet avoiding formal control of a meeting or casualness of a conversation. Focus groups maximise exploration of social phenomena though arguably in a contrived setting (Cohen et al. 2011). Dependent on structure they can provide an effective contribution to interpretive, inductive epistemology through explicit interrelations (Flick 2014).

Focus groups provided value to my study by weaving in EE themes and associated terms. They also offered opportunities to foster differing and sometimes challenging, multidimensional perspectives (Litosseliti 2007) through a group setting. Whilst I introduced EE topics for participants to consider, I acknowledged that this would attract a more generic, attitudinal dialogue, as opposed to more in-depth, individual and biographical perspectives which the interviews then captured. In a relaxed and non-threatening (neutral) environment the initiation of group discussion generates an evolving narrative (Denzin and Lincoln 2011) exploring shared opinions, recognising differences and providing comparison (Krueger and Casey 2015). However, much like interviews, to be effective focus groups require a willingness of participants (Flick 2014). With my role as an insider, this willingness was encouraged through established relationships between myself as the
facilitator (or moderator) and the participants. Furthermore, the group already had shared interests as part of the course and had already formed strong relationships with peers. This avoided the problem with focus groups brought together specifically for a research purpose, where participants must become acquainted with one another before embarking on the real research (Flick 2014).

A challenge I had to consider when deciding on the most effective research methods for this established group, related to friendships within the group and how they could influence the dynamics of the discussion (Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). Discouragement of anonymity, distraction, engagement in private conversation and inhibiting the expressions and opinions of others were just some of the challenges (Templeton 1994). However, as I had chosen to take the role of moderator and insider to the group, I was confident in my ability to manage the discussion and respond to potential disruption. Furthermore, the progression to individual interviews ensured that participants were given an opportunity to talk more openly without interruption from others.

The strengths of focus groups, which justified my decision to use them, relate to the opportunities for spontaneous, enriched discussion (Krueger and Casey 2015). By fostering the discussion of different and challenging perspectives I provided a realistic research environment and enabled themes to be explored multi-dimensionally (Litosseliti 2007). Hatch (2012) suggests this also provides a useful addition in seeking clarification. I aimed to establish participants’ knowledge, understanding and experiences of EE and their learner journey. Group perspectives could be shared, and discussion initiated between participants with commonality and in a less obtrusive manner, though sensitivity dependent (Flick 2014). Focus groups also have added benefit in providing an economical way of collating a large amount of data (Hayes and Singh 2012). However, transcription and analysis are still labour intensive (Barbour 2008). Nevertheless, as my study focused on a small group of fifteen participants, it was possible to facilitate two focus groups quite efficiently and as Cronin (2016) recommends, this ensured access to everyone in the study. Again, my role as facilitator and insider aided this process, as sessions could be timetabled in the normal course day to maximise attendance.
Effective structure and development of focus group questions was essential in my study to ensure generation of meaningful data accompanied by competent and controlled facilitation. Krueger and Casey (2000:39) refer to this as developing a ‘questioning route’. Crucially questions needed to respond to the research aim, objectives and associated questions with an appropriate agenda and direction (Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). I drafted an initial structure reflective of the research questions, which I then reviewed, edited and delivered through the adoption of Krueger’s (1998:22) ‘five categories of questions’. Appendix B illustrates the schedule used and questions for each category.

An opening question allows participants to feel comfortable by identifying characteristics and commonality (Krueger and Casey 2000). However, as relationships were already established the initial line of questioning was aimed at motives and incentives as to how participants came to the HEI and how they selected the course. This allowed participants to relax and become comfortable in sharing experiences and reflecting informally on their pre-HEI decision-making and career aspirations. Prompts were identified to aid discussion and to probe participants. As Stewart and Shamdasani (2015: 105) recognise, ‘the first response of a group participant is often incomplete’. Follow up questions were an important part of prompting further information. In the schedule, I prepared pre-determined prompts informed from literature themes and the conceptual framework. This encouraged discussion relating to backgrounds and interests (academically and socio-demographically) and the influence of family, friends, tutors, and course and HEI reputation. This provided critical data relating to Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, agency and associated learner transitions and trajectories. However, less contrived probing which reflects a more interpretive, inductive approach, was also important during delivery, with the use of more generic follow up questions such as ‘tell me more’ or ‘what do you mean by that’, to draw out unique, in-depth responses.

Krueger (1998) recommends an introductory question to introduce the general topic. In this study this focused on defining EE and associated terms. However, this also incorporated ‘transition’ questions as prompts and were structured to move the discussion towards
student perceptions of EE terms, integral to the study. Discussion aids offering alternative stimuli in the form of flip chart paper was built into the schedule to capture initial definitions. This engaged participant interest, by providing an illustrative vehicle for expression of ideas (Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). The second (transitional question) focused discussion towards EE and terms associated with real-world, vocational learning. This provided the logical link from the introductory question to the key questions which ‘drive the study’ (Krueger 1998:25).

Three key questions were designed sequentially, focusing on the main elements of the research covering participant thoughts, experiences and opinions of EE activities offered and importance of EE within the course. Discussion about the wider macro stakeholder environment was also raised and the contribution of EE to career preparation and contribution to social and economic well-being. These three key question areas allowed the focus groups to encapsulate the participants’ initial opinions, within a group, who share commonality and arguably vested interests in their course and career futures. The ending questions were designed to conclude EE discussions by asking how important participants felt these opportunities were within HEIs today. Prompts related to whether EE activities should be compulsory or optional in vocational programmes and preferences and dislikes in the provision. This encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and to the future, and thus providing a platform for progression to individual interviews.

As moderator it was important I applied effective skills in facilitating the discussion as advocated by Punch (2009). This involved weaving in the probe themes and associated follow up questions without misleading or steering discussion (Fern 2001). It was essential that my moderation of the focus groups allowed students to open up whilst managing participants who could potentially hijack conversations (Berg and Lune 2012). Despite participants being part of a group with shared characteristics, the influence of individuality and personality are inevitable. Krueger and Casey (2000:111) refer to four types to be aware of: the expert, the dominant talker, the shy participant and the rambler. Each present difficulty and some of the traits can appear in one person (such as the expert and dominant talker and even the rambler). However, as an insider, I was able to manage these characters
effectively, as relationships were already established; my role in intervention and control was not unusual when interacting with the group. Conversely I needed to ensure that my own knowledge of the participants in my work capacity did not influence the way in which respondents were facilitated.

Krueger and Casey (2015) note that a skilled moderator is an essential ingredient to ensure focus group success, and selection is key. When moderating I needed to ensure that important information was not missed in favour of an individual’s perspective or topic which may respond to pre-conceived ideas (Robson 2011). As acknowledged, I have beliefs and values which could have naturally infiltrated the process, and it was essential these were controlled. Crowne and Marlowe’s (1960) recognition of ‘social desirability reporting’ was a potential threat and I considered using a third party to facilitate focus groups and the interviews to mitigate this and wider criticisms of the insider position (Trowler 2008). However, I decided that the benefits of being an insider far outweighed the negatives and that openness and a transparent, qualitative data analysis method would reduce this threat. Recognising limitations and threats of being an insider in my study, was essential, and as Mercer suggests, this wields a double edge sword (2007). Transparency is crucial to ensure credibility of the process (Unluer 2012). My moderator role offered a unique status which enabled meaningful engagement with participants, as endorsed by Atkins and Wallace (2012). Furthermore, Cousin’s (2010) perspective on ‘positional piety’ reinforces this further, where, as researcher and practitioner, I was ethnographically immersed in the environment to offers the most effective position (Delamont 2012).

My ability to manage the location, environment and resources were crucial elements to ensure success, as highlighted by Krueger and Casey (2015). For the purposes of the study the focus groups took place in my HEI workplace. This ease of access and familiarity of the environment is recognised positively (Barbour 2009). Furthermore, it provided the advantage of accessing participants directly on campus and could be scheduled effectively around the timetable to maximise attendance. Integrating the focus group into a university day, could have had a negative impact causing ambiguity or confusion for the participant, on whether they were engaging in a course or a research-based activity. This could have
had psychological effects, influencing behaviours and contributions. Participants might not express themselves openly and honestly if they felt responses could impact or jeopardise academic performance. However, to counteract this, the ethics process made participants fully aware of the research activities and how these would be differentiated from their standard timetable. Email communications, clarity through opening presentations and supporting participation information sheets and consent forms, all helped participants to understand the process.

Alternative classroom venues were booked to disassociate the participants’ taught units and research activity. The key, as Cronin (2016) notes, is to ensure the venue suits both the research project and the participants and that a relaxed and comfortable environment is provided. Physical arrangement of the room was also important to avoid influencing the interaction amongst group members as recognised by Stewart and Shamdasani (2015). As the object was to initiate discussion seating was set out so that eye contact was possible between me, as moderator, and participants. The use of a recording device supported my typed notes made during discussions. Krueger and Casey (2015) reinforce that notes are essential but should not interfere with the spontaneous nature of the discussion. Assistant moderators are sometimes utilised to undertake note taking but I wanted to avoid distraction or interference with an already established group dynamic. Instead the recording device captured the full discussion for transcription, whilst typed notes during the session provided reassurance should technology fail (Krueger and Casey 2000).

3.6.2 Interviews

Described as the ‘gold standard’ of qualitative research (Barbour 2008: 112), interviews were selected as the second method for generating data, offering a major advantage in providing the opportunity for more personal, individual exploration of each learner journey. This removes the risk of social influence within a focus group allowing the interviewer to probe responses more deeply, personal motives and feelings (Bell 2005; Delamont 2012). This leans more to a biographical interview with a relatively unstructured
approach enabling naturalistic, holistic and fluid discussion encouraging unforced conversation (Robson 2011).

All fifteen participants were interviewed allowing individual perspectives to be captured and the collation of enlightened, enriched knowledge to build a unique picture (Johnson and Christenson 2014). Interviews of this nature must be designed to encourage ‘the elicitation of open ended narratives’ (Smith 2007:420). Furthermore, good rapport and the use of encouraging techniques to tease out information (Berg and Lune 2012) was needed for effective exploration of how participants make sense of EE and their learner journey. Some framing was required to ensure a balanced perspective (Kincheloe and Berry 2004) and to provide transparency to address my role as an insider and the subsequent risk of my own values, beliefs and assumptions influencing the process. Like focus groups, I considered using a third party was considered to undertake the interviews (Denzin et al. 2011) but again I felt the established relationship and rapport between myself and the participants and the benefits this brings outweighed potential criticism. The counter argument is clear that an insider relationship, provides a relaxed, comfortable environment to explore perspectives (Atkins and Wallace 2012) and reinforces how the interviewer / interviewees relationship is integral for success (Dowling and Brown 2010).

Minichiello et al. (1990:89) introduced a continuum model from structured through to semi-structured and finally unstructured interviews. Punch (2009:145) suggests that ‘dimensions of this vary’ as well as how deep the interview goes. The interview schedule was designed to encourage open-ended discussion applying a non-standardised, biographical and narrative method. However, the format also applied a semi-structured format, as themes from the conceptual framework provided some focus. Whilst I chose not to provide prescriptive questions, probing and prompting themes were beneficial in exploring each participant’s perception of EE. This, as Fielding and Thomas (2016:282) suggest, allows the interviewer to be ‘free to alter their sequence and probe for more information in their own words’. Maykut and Morehouse (1994:83) refer to an ‘interview guide’ as opposed to schedule, indicating a more fluid format and where the researcher ‘is free to explore’. Interpretation of the interview approach varies and largely due to the ‘ubiquity and adaptability’ of methods as described by Fielding and Thomas (2016:282). It was important I acknowledged this through my research design and accepted, as Maykut
and Morehouse (1994:34) state, that social research and qualitative inquiry requires a ‘tolerance for ambiguity’.

I adopted the term ‘interview guide’ as opposed to schedule, to embrace a more flexible process. Appendix C illustrates this guide, informed from the conceptual framework and focus groups outcomes. The guide reflected a similar format to the focus group schedule, although themes were broken down to encourage more in-depth conversation. Questions encouraged open dialogue, endorsed by Maykut and Morehouse (1994), and include “tell me about”, “what do you think”, “how do you feel” etc. Themes had a logical sequence, beginning with pre-university background to establish factors to aid identification of participant habitus, structure and agency. Themes progressed to explore decision-making about the post-1992 HEI and the course, and reflection on participant experiences of university and course life across the three-year programme. This included discussion of initial career aspirations, learning trajectories and the impact of EE activities and interventions. Core themes relating to EE and associated terms were then introduced.

Whilst the interview guide provided a loose structure it was important that I was able to adapt as the conversation developed. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015:194) acknowledge, ‘the interviewer must continually make on the spot decisions about what to ask and how’ along with which answers to follow up on and which not to.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015:194) refer to the ‘interviewer craftsman’ and I adopted their principles in the design of the interview guide and management of the process. ‘Knowledge’ ‘structure’ and clarity are key factors which I applied through the guide, whilst the rest of the craftsman criteria focused more on delivery and execution. It was important that I was ‘gentle’, ‘sensitive’, ‘open’, ‘steering’ and ‘critical’ in my technique, recalling information and ‘interpreting’ responses where required (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015: 195). This applied ‘communication and listening skills’ and involved subsequent probing and follow up questions, recognised by Punch (2009: 150) as part of the ‘general check list’.

Punch (2009) advises that the beginning of the interview needs to establish a rapport with the participant. As I already had an established relationship, this was a lesser priority. However, the guide still included an opening statement to remind the interviewee of the
background, purpose and aim of the study. Smith (2007:422) suggests that this self-disclosure ‘provides a bridge for building relationships with participants’ and directed the participants to the study to avoid being distracted by their day to day academic relationship. Too much information regarding the research can introduce bias, be intrusive (Siedman 2012), or potentially ‘lead’ the interviewees with a specific agenda and as Kolar et al. (2015:15) concurs it could result in ‘potentially exploitative research relationships’. It was important that I was aware of these risks and avoided these pitfalls as recognised previously regarding implications of being an insider.

Hermann (2004) refers to interviews as an evolving drama and through the interaction and responsibility of the interviewer to facilitate this (Flick 2014). It was important for me to maintain a careful balance between managing the process to limit bias and subjectivity, and to maximise the openness of narrative based conversation to capture the richness of the data. Furthermore, the practicalities and logistics of the interview process had to be carefully managed including what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015:119) refer to as ‘non-humans and surroundings’. Physical location, arrangement of furniture and the sound recorder, like the focus groups, can all influence the quality of the process. Brinkmann and Kyale (2015:121) note how the interview ‘is not simply a function of two or more persons who come together to talk, for their coming together is always mediated by a host of nonhuman factors that could be taken into account’. Principles of the focus group were replicated, to maximise attendance from interviewees, by arranging sessions on university campus, and ensuring a comfortable and relaxed environment. Interviews were conducted in a neutral setting, so staff offices were avoided and generic interview rooms with casual furniture were booked within the university. This avoided disruption and distraction and helped differentiate the session from that of a normal student/academic tutorial.

3.7 Ethical issues and approval

Research is guided by a code of ethics which has evolved over years to accommodate changing ethos, values, needs and expectations of associated stakeholders (Kumar 2014; Brooks et al. 2014). It was essential to comply with the sponsoring university’s ethics policy for approval before research was undertaken (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). As
a practitioner-based study specific ethical issues also had to be addressed within my HEI workplace (as the gatekeeper) including management consent and informed consent from students participating, alongside clarification on privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, protection (personally and academically) and rights to withdraw (Wellington 2015; Barbour 2008). Further complications related to the dividing line between research (solicited) data and professional (unsolicited) data (Punch 2009; Flick 2014), as it was identified that secondary material associated with the students learning journey may be utilised (such as participant results of EE questionnaires, extracts from placement journals etc). Clarification of data ownership, use of results, conclusions and avoidance or misuse of materials were addressed to gain gatekeeper approval. Ethical issues arose around my insider role, status and influence and regarding positionality, previously highlighted, including risks of subjectivity, bias, vested interests, employer agendas, funding, and political, socio-economic factors (Robson 2011). A clear ethics statement was produced to ensure a transparent, open and professional process to maintain integrity and quality of the study. Furthermore, appropriate ethical and consensual considerations (permission and anonymity), to comply with important ethical standards (Barbour 2008) and codes of conduct were required (Kumar 2014). Appendix D provides the ethics documentation including the application form and evidence of approval, gatekeeper approval, participant information sheet, consent form and risk assessment.

Whilst the subject matter relating to EE was not deemed sensitive, it was important to acknowledge the individuality and personal nature of each participant’s biographical account. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and decision-making. This had the potential to raise more sensitive issues associated to each participant’s background, regarding class, education and the influence of family, friendships, relationships etc. Furthermore, it could have uncovered more deep-rooted influences including personal issues, learning needs and pressures and anxieties associated with student life. To respond to these sensitivities, I reassured participants of confidentiality and in my professional capacity as a practitioner, I ensured participants had an outlet for further guidance if the interviews exposed sensitivities requiring further support. At my HEI there is an established student welfare support team, so this provided an appropriate mechanism for referral. It was important to ensure protection and support for any vulnerabilities
exposed through the interviews, as well maximising the value of material provided. As part of informed consent, and the participant information sheet, participants were made aware that a summary of outcomes would be made available at their request.

3.8 Analysis

It was important to select the right tools for the job (Saldana 2015) of analysis and a method that responded to the challenges of potential bias, subjectivity and to strengthen ‘credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability’ (Shenton 2004:64; Guba and Lincoln1981; Lincoln and Guba 1985) within the research process.

3.8.1 Thematic approach

I chose the tools and techniques associated with thematic analysis as the most effective approach to manage the volume and depth of qualitative material generated and to allow in depth, interpretive and inductive analysis. Methods of thematic analysis have evolved considerably and consists of systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct understanding and meaning (Seal 2016). Whilst my study was inductive, the constructionist approach supports the recognition of prior knowledge and theoretical pre-conceptions (the conceptual framework). Therefore, my study was subject to scrutiny through analysis of the new material collated. I acknowledged the differences between objectivist and constructionist perspectives but accepted that in practice it tends to have elements of both. I provided a frame to clarify starting assumptions and research actions but then embraced a constructionist perspective to explore participant perspectives, through thematic analysis (Barbour 2008).

For thematic analysis I used a process which incorporated coding/labelling, categorising and theming, methods regularly embraced as part of the qualitative revolution (Barbour 2008). This rigorous thematic approach enables qualitative research to be defensible and even respectable today, allowing techniques to combine to best suit each individual
inductive, interpretive study. Punch (2009:170) reaffirms how techniques ‘are often interconnected’ and for my study, I embraced Flick’s (2014) notion, that a combination of strategies surrounding thematic, narrative and aspects of discourse analysis (exploring power cultures at micro/meso/macro level) were incorporated and maximising opportunities in, what Barbour (2008:31) refers to as ‘illuminating context’. Rigorous and repetitive analysis and synthesis of my qualitative data was essential to ensure that I had analysed the content deeply and through different lenses (Seal 2016). This enabled reoccurring codes, patterns to be explored thoroughly and to ensure that data was given meaning before themes were formed, defined and re-defined.

One of the complexities of qualitative, narrative data is recognised by Hayes (2009: 70) describing analysis of social interaction as ‘vague’, ‘messy’ and difficult to conceptualise and control’, with Smith (2007), Silverman (2013) and Taylor (2013) further recognising flaws and complex characteristics and variation of spoken discourse, despite attempts to formalise it. The strengths in exploring a combination of thematic perspectives, alongside language and social phenomena was appropriate to explore learner life journeys and where there was a clear connection between the individual and social context. I considered alternative methods such as content analysis (Robson 2011). However, methods which are rigid, quantitative modes of analysis were arguably a contradiction in the benefits of undertaking a natural, inductive approach (Maykut and Morhouse 1994; Barbour 2008) so were declined. I did though embrace technological software to aid the management and illustration of qualitative material and the themes emerging from the study by using NVivo12 (Hutchison et al. 2010). This provided strength to the management of qualitative data and in presenting the themes and patterns in complimentary formats.

3.8.2 Presentation of analysis and findings

In response to the research question - What are student perspectives on employer engagement as part of their HE learner journey? – I undertook initial analysis and interpretation of data. Three themes which emerged from the focus group data were: pre-HE life, employer engagement terms, and EE experiences, impact and importance, outlined
in Appendix E. Appendix F illustrates the reoccurring words and topics and compares how categories were discussed between each of the two focus groups. Appendix G illustrates the re-alignment of themes following interview analysis, providing a more logical structure with the addition of a fourth theme: *post-HE life*. The four themes capture patterns from all the qualitative material and Figure 3.2 provides an overview including a summary of the categories of codes identified, grouped and analysed and which are presented in Findings Chapters 4 and 5.

Figure 3.2 Overview of themes

Chapter 4 presents findings on theme 1 Pre-HE life, providing background to the participants, their circumstances, attitudes and career aspirations before university life. Chapter 5 is broken into three sub sections reflecting themes 2-4 focusing on EE definitions, participant perspectives on EE within their learner journey and reflections on their future career aspirations Post-HE.
Chapter 4  Pre-HE Life (theme 1)

This chapter sets the scene in understanding the background relating to the cohort and how this informed their learner journeys. One of the challenges I faced when analysing the data and considering presentation and discussion of the findings, was digression from the main topic of EE. However, through careful consideration of the data and resulting patterns and themes, and in line with the refined research aim and objectives, I felt that a separate chapter focused solely on the pre-HE lives of my students was paramount. To truly understand their HE learner journey and exposure to EE opportunities it was essential to take a step back and understand their background and decision-making before university life.

Table 4.1 provides a summary of the participants’ socio-demographic characteristics and helps build a picture of the learners. Analysis of data (see Appendix H) provided substantial evidence to demonstrate how learner status, attitudes, behaviours and cultures, influenced decision-making pre-HE. Participants shared many characteristics of non-traditional learners and those with vocational career aspirations. There were also complex and contradictory behaviours and attitudes. These related to levels of academic and personal confidence, self-esteem, resilience and defiance against, what emerged, as a pre-defined cultural script created through the fields in which they were placed and the associated, habitus and structures which intertwined their lives.

People prominent in the lives of participants included family, friendship groups and more formal school, college and industry settings. However, despite the potentially powerful influence of these structures and the wider macro environment (government, media etc), image, reputation and the battle between pre/post 1992 universities had little bearing on course and HEI selection. Instead the cohort were guided by the strength of their vocational habitus and specifically the combination of vocational learning and development of managerial level skills, knowledge and competencies that it offered, allowing them to explore their horizons for action and in a subject area where they had related passions recreationally (and beyond education).
Table 4.2 Summary of cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gap year / mature</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>First to uni in direct family</th>
<th>Learning / other needs identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Gap yr and extra academic year</td>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>None identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Direct from yr 13</td>
<td>A Levels</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Dyslexic and some mental health needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Direct from yr 13</td>
<td>A Levels</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Gap year</td>
<td>A Levels</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>None identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Gap year</td>
<td>A Levels and BTEC</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>None identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Extra academic yr</td>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilary</td>
<td>White British</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td>A Levels</td>
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Numerous learner narratives are included to evidence the findings. However, this Chapter begins with two vignettes featuring Gary and Noelle to set the scene and provide in-depth examples to illustrate topics and illuminating the shared and contrasting perspectives indicative of this cohort. A snapshot of these two participants shows commonality and individuality which impacted on how they received and responded to the EE experiences provided as they progressed their HE learner journey in preparation for career paths, post-graduation.

4.1 Noelle’s story

Noelle came with a BTEC qualification and working class status; she acknowledged being first to go to university in her family. She described herself as being labelled one of the ‘troubled kids’ during school life, born out of less academic interests and preferring hands on, practical opportunities and engaging far more positively with experiential learning as opposed to traditional didactic teaching. Her recognition and acceptance of being less academic was accompanied by self-deprecation and low self-esteem in educational competencies.

The label provided at school had formed part of her learner identity and had influenced her attitude and behaviour to education and future career aspirations. This negativity had initially affected her agency and confidence to consider her horizons for action and careership. She talked of doubt and confusion as to what should be her next step, revealing a randomness and scattergun approach to considering future career pathways, including the military, intelligence and robotics, animal welfare, sports coaching and related jobs in outdoor and extreme sports.

Noelle’s uncertainty was further fuelled by the influence of family, particularly her stepfather. He did not agree with her going to university and questioned her academic ability and motives, along with being critical of the financial implications. The latter point
resulting in her having a year out to prove she had the funds to support herself. Despite this, and accepting her lower position in the academic hierarchy, Noelle demonstrated a defiance against the institutional and personal structures in which she was immersed. She fought the label and stigma of non-traditional learner, choosing not to conform to the limited horizons for action, and instead, seeking HE to exceed the expected level of opportunity open to her. Despite her stepfather’s negativity, she was positive about the support given by her mother, teachers, work colleagues and friends. A number of these individuals that had contributed to her life and decision-making, and as role models, had profound influence. Her work placement supervisor was a particularly key figure, who she admitted she aspired to be, and whom had made her look at the world and her own behaviours differently.

Noelle’s, inner confidence and resilience was not always stable, and through her narrative conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions were often in conflict, one minute showing a strength to ‘rage against the machine’ and the next, expressing uncertainty, self-deprecation and questioning future careers pathways. This was a pattern that continued throughout Noelle’s learner journey whether it was about engagement/disengagement in studies, responding to academic, vocational and /or extra-curricular experiences, or discussing life outside of university. Noelle would swing between expressions of resilience, defiance and self-confidence in her learner and wider life journeys, through to vulnerability, weakness and self-deprecation. Her choice of university demonstrated this dichotomy of emotion and the difficulty in predicting her behaviour. Noelle was astute in recognising the old vs new (pre/post 1992) university conflict, and the image, reputation and status of Russell Group universities above others. However, she was adamant that she wanted to go to a post-1992 university which offered the vocationally focused degree that she wanted to undertake, regardless of reputation. Here institutional structure/class status had no bearing and it was her passions and interests that concluded her choice.

Adventure, outdoor, extreme sports and travel were Noelle’s passions. She preferred non-traditional/academic subjects and excelled at sports and lessons which required a practical ability and/or where topics were work related. This was the attraction to the undergraduate programme and specifically the combination of academic and vocational learning,
underpinned by a management context. Despite Noelle’s admission of lacking traditional academic abilities, her confident and defiant characteristics were again magnified when recognising the importance of investing in a degree which had longevity in career progression and opportunities in more senior positions for the future. Regardless of the lack of career direction, Noelle was clear in her decision-making to select a degree that fulfilled her personal passions and aided her careership and employability.

4.2 Gary’s story

Gary was unusual among the cohort in not being from a working class background or first generation to go to university. As a grammar school-boy, studying traditional A Levels, he had a middle class upbringing and a supportive family and school structure which pushed for him to excel. However, he was labelled as one of the problem children at school, regularly rebelling against the structural influences of traditional academic institutions and being close to exclusion. Gary relayed his argumentative nature as a teenager and a defiance against authority, whether this was advice and guidance or direct instruction. He described not liking school and wanting to run away or escape from institutionalised life.

Whilst Gary may not have been labelled a non-traditional learner in the sense of his educational and class status, his dislike of academia, authority and institutional control likened him to his non-traditional peers, as did his positive engagement in vocational learning and love of adventure, outdoors, travel and sporting activity. Gary talked candidly about the pressures he felt from the grammar school teachers, to pursue a Russell Group university, describing how he was told what he should and shouldn’t apply for. When he identified the adventure degree at a post-1992 university as his first choice, he was told by teachers to replace it with a Russell Group university and a more science based subject. But, instead of putting the Russell Group University down as first choice, Gary chose to ignore this advice and lied to his teachers when completing the UCAS form, thus demonstrating how vocational habitus and individual agency were overriding in this case.
Despite this defiance, Gary experienced swings of emotion and self-efficacy. He talked at length about family and personal circumstances which had impacted on his life prior to coming to university and which continued through his learner journey. Subsequently this exposed a vulnerability and element of self-doubt in contrast to the defiance previously described. It showed how family had the potential to influence an individual and how life outside of an educational setting, often impacted on experiences and behaviours. Originally Gary was not even sure he wanted to go to university at all, due to personal issues, a lack of clarity on future direction and a desire to escape as opposed to settle into formal societal life. This was a desire that featured throughout his narrative and often influenced or inhibited his decision-making. His lack of confidence resulted in a need to escape to avoid making decisions. Despite this, and after a gap year where he still felt unfulfilled, Gary chose to ‘fill the void’ by trying HE.

The rest of this Chapter now explores in more detail the sub themes that emerged about pre-HE life and decision-making, as reflected in Noelle and Gary’s stories and how it relates to the overall HE learner journey.

4.3 Learner background, behaviours and culture

Whilst there are individual aspects to each participant, fuelled by personal habitus and the structural influences surrounding them, this group shared many characteristics. These related to educational background and social class, through to the less tangible attitudes, behaviours and subconscious values and beliefs reflective of the life and culture to which they were accustomed. All participants expressed similarity pertaining to non-traditional characteristics. For many of the participants the choice to go to university was not a very proactive one, during focus group 1, Toby for instance reflected, “I kind of just wanted to get on with life and not do more education, cos’ I didn’t really do very well at school,” and “do I want to do another three or four years of education?”. Gary added “like Toby, I didn’t want to go to uni. I deferred my place for a year and had some time out, I still wasn’t sure about it”. Further extracts from the focus groups (Appendix I) reinforced the patterns emerging in participants’ status pre-HE and particularly the apathy, boredom and
last minute nature of their HE decision-making which for many resulted in going through clearing.

Most participants had come from BTEC courses reflecting how they preferred this vocational, practical and coursework based approach to study to traditional A Levels. As Nel described, “it was easier, whilst there was some writing involved the majority was practical”. Ben reinforced this describing his BTEC as 100% coursework that “sort of inspired me rather than exams”. Despite the positivity shared about a BTEC’s ability to meet non-traditional learning approaches, participants recognised the vocational stigma attached and saw them as less academic. Noelle shared: “it was kind of classed as the thing you did if you were a drop out”. Furthermore, they associated this with their own academic weaknesses as Lara described “I wasn’t very good at school, I’ve never been very good” and Hannah echoed, describing herself as not “academically bright”.

Participants were repeatedly self-deprecating in academic ability linking class status and flaws in educational competences. Lance acknowledged his family being “working class” as did Noelle who recognised her less privileged status: “I was competing from people with really good backgrounds, and, um sort of better educational levels than me”. Other examples also alluded to negative experiences at school and college and how this influenced attitudes and behaviours. Gary emphasised this shared undercurrent: “I hated education, I was awful I hated school that much, I was like the worst, not the worst student but I was a problem I got in trouble a lot and got excluded twice”. These fractured educational biographies show how status and background influenced participants’ self-perception as a non-traditional or non-academic learner.

Most participants described being active learners and preferring applied, practical and a hands-on approach, indicating that traditional school/college structures had failed to engage them. Participants self-identified as non-traditional/vocational learners and the fields they were placed in had created and magnified these attitudes. Participants who studied BTECs indicated an underlying anxiety towards more traditional academic subjects as Terry noted about A-levels, “I probably wouldn’t have done very well”. This
perspective also influenced decision-making and HE course selection, as Bonnie indicated "there’s no point in my applying for a degree in these [traditional academic] subjects”.

Eight participants were the first to go to university, reinforcing their status as non-traditional learners. Furthermore, it was evident that this was an important declaration; participants like Lara were keen to share this information with pride “I was the first one in the family so that made me happy” and Matt, “yeah so none of my family have been to uni”. This was a notable achievement in their transition and a conscious affirmation to become more than the self-perception of academic and class status. This is a substantive point demonstrating that despite these participants perceiving limitations in terms of ability and attitude to HE they were keen to disprove it.

There were also opposing characteristics in direct conflict. Whilst most participants expressed a lack of confidence regarding their abilities and potential, some appeared particularly assertive in their decision-making to go to university. A minority of participants, like Hilary, were clear on HE: “I knew I wanted to go”. Grant took this further showing the power of his agency, “I’m pretty independent, taking responsibility for my own life and stuff”. Some participants were adamant they were going to university despite demonstrating a lack of confidence and thus demonstrating a contrast of emotions. For example, Bonnie had revealed her mental health and dyslexia fears but then presented an alternative perspective “I was only ever going down a degree path” and as Grant supported “I’m quite stubborn ... when I do something I just go and do it”. This minority shared a defiance and actively went against the expectations and influences of others, showing the conflict in agency from fitting the mould to defying expectations.

Another pattern was shared tastes, opinions and general culture of the group and pertaining to their recreational passions and interests in the outdoor/adventure industry. Most participants like Toby described an “absolute love of the outdoors” whilst others focused on their competence like Noelle “I really enjoyed it’ [sports] ‘and was actually good at it”. A shared lifestyle was clear with some, like Grant, describing how previous practical
experiences had increased his enthusiasm and the attraction of the physiological benefits “anything that gives you a bit of a rush and was a bit dangerous”. Participants told of a collective enjoyment of practical activity and a wanderlust that disregarded gender, background, educational status etc. These passions for travel, adventure and exploration were habitual to participants on the course and were best reflected in Gary’s statement “in my lovely dreamscape head I just wanna’ be away and go and do my own thing”. These core dispositions were shared across the group and shaped preferences and outlooks as they transitioned into HE and beyond. Appendix J provides further evidence to illustrate differences and similarities in learner background, behaviours and culture.

4.4 Career aspirations

One powerful point illuminated from the findings was the general lack of career direction shared by many participants and evidence of their changeable career aspirations pre-HE. During conversation most participants either expressed little idea or direction to their future jobs or they described two or three widely different career ideas including “Fine Arts” (Bonnie), “Chef” (Lara), “Paramedic/Health Service” (Hannah), “Artificial Intelligence and Robotics” (Noelle) and “Graphic Design” (Matt). These were then excluded with reasons often about lack of confidence in educational abilities, indicating the influence of horizons for action (or lack of) or just because they changed their minds. As Lara, previously interested in catering acknowledged, “it was either the option of going to uni or being stuck in like a kitchen for the next 40 years”.

The diverse range of career ideals reflected the varying educational topics studied by these participants at year 12 and 13 including BTECs in Sport, Outdoor, Public Services, Health and Social Care, Engineering, through to diverse A Levels in Product Design, Electronics, Physics, Business, Geography, Fine Arts, Media, English Literature and Media. This reinforced the lack of direction that these non-traditional learners often exuded. Further evidence is shown by the number of participants who went through clearing and/or left it until very late to decide to come: “so I applied for that [the university course] and I thought I would see what happens but I was too late to go in that year so I had a year out”
(Grant). In some cases, university was a last resort: “I needed to do something. I know it sounds really bad but just like I needed to fill it with something. I wanted to fill it with something I think I’ll enjoy.” (Toby).

Participants shared a general lack of academic confidence and an indecisiveness in career potential and this undercurrent is captured in statements like Debbie’s: “…um, I don’t really know if I’m honest, I think because I didn’t have any job aspirations after school, uh, I had no idea what I was going to do”. Even those that had some career ideas did not seem entirely sure and most participants acknowledged that progressing in HE was a way out of making a career decision. Toby described this as “biding time” whilst Gary described it as a “back-up” indicating that horizons for action were unclear. Some participants on gap years also described limitations during this time and poor employment experiences which influenced their decision to go to university. As Gary reflected “I needed to find something else to fill the void because if I don’t I’ll end up stuck and I was working at Waitrose at the time and I thought, I can’t stay here”. Grant had a similar, uninspiring employment experience which pushed him towards HE “had two months there, that was rubbish, so I left”. This indicated that despite the limited horizons expectant of these non-traditional learners, they defied the stereotype and strived for more inspiring vocations; and not satisfied with mundane roles.

Reflecting the adventurous spirit of this cohort, a minority of participants identified the military as a potential career during pre-HE discussions. However, whilst quick to share this aspiration, there was a mutual apprehension in entering the services at that stage in their lives as Toby expressed “I knew that I wasn’t ready, mature enough or fit enough, so I thought, you know, three years will be a good time to…you know, grow up a bit, get fitter”. Noelle echoed similar views, describing herself as “quite young and quite immature” and not really knowing what it meant to be an Officer. Like others, they saw HE as biding time to consider their career, without having to make decisions immediately. Other participants dismissed military careers based on medical issues, change of interests and/or the influence of family members, as Nel said: “uh…I don’t know, me mam was a wee bit annoyed cos I was only 18 and she didn’t want me to go away”. This extract provides a good example and introduction to the power and influence people had in a
participant’s life, which is now explored further. Appendix K provides further supporting evidence on participant career aspirations and HE decision-making at this time.

### 4.5 People influences on decision-making

The influence of people surrounding each participant’s life was a dominant factor pre-HE and subsequently decision-making in future career /HE progression. People identified as having influence or impact in their lives revolved around formal roles (school/college teachers, employers) as well as personal family and friends. Experiences differed across the group on the impact that these people had, but all mentioned these roles in some way, whether positively or negatively.

All participants mentioned their family during HE decision-making and associated career progression. The type of influence was often reflective of the parent/guardian’s own academic and educational experiences and knowledge of HE, as Gary explained when talking about his father “throughout my childhood I remember him saying, 'oh there’s no need to go to uni, you only need to go to uni if you want to be a doctor or a lawyer'. He didn’t do very well in education”. Generational influences were also noted as described by Lance: “well my nan at the time, she didn’t really understand, my nan’s old, like ninety-two and she’s a very traditional woman. She just never had anything in her time”. In both cases, these family opinions did not thwart the individuals in proceeding with HE but demonstrated the struggle that participants had between structural forces and agency, with the latter overcoming in most instances.

Most participants discussed family interventions positively showing the impact support and reassurance could have. This was not in a pressured way, but more supportive and encouraging. Terry’s narrative reflected this manner when talking about his mum; whilst he noted fondly, that she was “always nagging” he went on to say that she was happy he was “stepping out, stepping out the circle and going down a different direction”. This resonated with others, like Lance, who stated that his Dad’s advice was “get a degree in something you enjoy”. Bonnie’s views were similar, describing her parents as “good
liberal people” who emphasised it being her choice, although she admitted that her parents did have opinions “but never outright said, oh you should do this”. Familial habitus such as the influence of parental opinion, experiences and values on HE, was strong in participant agency. For example, a supportive approach by parents, offered empowerment to an individual which resulted in mostly independent choices to proceed into HE and beyond. Family derived habitus often determined participant’s desires to seek satisfaction in careers and to embark on what they enjoyed, as opposed to the force of traditional academic pursuits.

Most participants were first generation, and this also had some bearing on family influences. Parents who had not been to university wanted their son/daughter to have the opportunities that they had not sought or been able to access. Matt’s commentary exemplified this but also indicated a pressure to go which can add to problems in career identity, transitions and decision-making: “so none of my family have been to uni. My dad was happy for me. I mean of course there was a bit of influence from him to go, to go and do it”. Whilst family structure, was largely positive on pursuing HE, there were some negatives due to conflict between parents/guardians. Noelle demonstrated this:

“obviously my dad isn’t really in the picture. My stepdad was the complete opposite. He wasn’t really nurturing, he was more like, uh, telling me everything that I wasn’t doing and I wouldn’t amount to what I wanted to do. And then my mum was the opposite and it didn’t, you know it doesn’t matter what you do as long as you’re happy ... she never really had a purpose herself”

Noelle spoke candidly about the negative impact of her stepdad. The prominence of this family figure continued throughout her learner journey, like other participant accounts, whether consciously or subconsciously. This was similar with siblings, and whilst most were relatively inconsequential to this study, Lance’s story was unique as it conflicted with the influence of familial habitus and patterns of cultural class. As a twin, similar dispositions regarding aspirations would be expected. However, whilst Lance preferred non-academic pursuits, his brother pursued traditional subjects and describing how he and his brother “just don’t mix”. This was a fascinating nuance where individuality (or
personal dispositions) overcame family habitus and demonstrated a traditional/vocational divide between the brothers, despite a shared upbringing. Whilst habitus, structures and backgrounds were influential to participants, Lance’s story revealed exceptions and demonstrated the problems in attempting to generalise patterns of behaviour and attitudes.

Friendships were also influential and at times suggested a ‘sheep mentality’ in HE decision-making. Hilary’s statement mirrored several of the group: “um, I think a lot of my friends were going as well and I kind of wanted to go”. Several participants had similar examples where friends/peers had influenced them to explore the HE route either with direct encouragement or just by observing the life that others were having. Terry demonstrated this: “I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, all my friends had already been at uni for a year and I’d like travelled to their uni’s and had a taste of the life”. In Terry’s case, lack of career aspirations was also evident and reaffirms the collective characteristics of these participants, who are guided by limited horizons for action. This indicated how HE was an escapism from the structures and fields in which they were placed and a chance to get away from home life. This again exposed the undercurrent of cultural/class stigma and feelings of inadequacy in academic ability as Terry further explained: “all my friends went to A Levels they were all straight A participants and I wasn’t exactly that, and then I kind of fell out of that circle cos, I didn’t do so well”. This reaffirms the battle that these participants had in whether to conform to the cultural/class mould in which they were placed or rise above it.

In contrast to participants who had observed friends at university and felt jealous they were missing out, others talked about friends from their home town that had not gone to university and instead, had got into trouble, or were doing little with their life and which had spurned their own motivation for HE. Toby emphasised this point: “it really bothers me when I look back at my friends and they haven’t done anything for four years and I think, how?” Despite these friendships, the differences between individuals was evident and how participants like Toby wanted to escape from their old life and pursue other avenues.
The role of school/college in each participant’s pre-HE life varied greatly but was a prominent feature. This demonstrated the power and influence of early interventions, impacting learner career identity and either reinforcing or challenging the position in which each was placed in society and associated cultural and class systems. Some spoke highly of the support and guidance provided by teachers, tutors or support staff and those who were self-deprecating in their own academic abilities tended to acknowledge this specifically. Noelle, who had previously referred to competing with “better educational levels” noted her teacher’s influence “he kind of supported me in what I wanted to do”. Similarly, Toby described how a support worker had encouraged him to complete a UCAS application, reassuring him “if you don’t wanna do it, it doesn’t matter, you haven’t got anything to lose”. Feedback from discussions clarified how, with the right support and encouragement, those lacking in confidence about their own abilities developed a more positive attitude and outlook to pursue HE.

Conversely, negative perspectives on a school/college’s intervention in an individual’s decision-making was also apparent indicating an underlying agenda to push participants towards HE, with little justification or career guidance. Gary’s story, reinforced this in depth, exposing the multi-layered and connected factors across stakeholders, in a learner journey:

“I feel they went about it the very wrong way…a lot of people took their word for it and I was one of those people. I had things I wanted to do that didn’t fit in line with what they wanted me to do … I feel a lot like they just saw me as a number, someone they wanted to go to a Russel Group so they could say yes, our school had this many going, and I didn’t like that”

This exposed not only the negative impact a school/college can have on a learner’s attitude and behaviour but the symbolic influence of HEI status and reputation and the importance some schools/colleges still place on where participants go. This, reinforces the underlying connections between a participant’s educational experience and the framing of their future trajectories.
Participants in part-time study or having a gap year in some form of employment, talked about employer interactions and how this influenced whether to pursue university. It varied whether advice was sought by the participant or given freely, as did the actual opinions of employers. It was evident that those who were working, had been influenced by their employer regarding HE. Noelle talked at length about the inspiring and positive impact a line manager had on her decision to go to university, indicating that she was particularly susceptible to influence of those that she looked up to and respected:

“... just one of the best human beings I think I’ve ever met. He’s one of those people that, it doesn’t matter, he’s very wise for his age, so he’s done a lot of travelling, he’s very philosophical, in terms of what education is and why you should do it ... he gave me very different perspectives ... he was the one that did say, you know, you should go to uni”

This reaffirms how the field (within an employed or work setting) can influence transitions and inform values and beliefs. Words like philosophical and travel resonate with the characteristics already highlighted for this cohort so it was unsurprising that someone in power, could be influential in establishing career goals.

Employers also had indirect influences, and this was more about the working environment. For example, Grant described negatively, a highly pressured and demanding job which spurred his motivation to leave and go to university:

“24 hour shifts for like £10 a day... not sleeping, not getting to snowboard, drinking when you had free time ... I spent two months doing that I thought this isn’t, this isn’t [laughs] doing me any good!”

This resonated with others with employment dissatisfaction and frustrations, which pushed them to consider HE. Patterns indicate that participants who were working full-time or part-time, had been influenced by industry experiences, whether by a person or the environment. This was true, whether employment related to the adventure industry in
which they wanted a future career, or a non-related industry. In either case experiences motivated participants to seek HE to extend their horizons. Further evidence illustrating the breadth of influence, family, schools and industry could have on decision-making Pre-HE is provided in Appendix L.

4.6 HE attraction

It was important to explore decision-making to come to a post-92 HEI in the first place and whether the image of the HEI as a modern, vocationally based university had influenced this, and the EE opportunities promoted. For participates in this cohort, location was a powerful draw. Some linked it directly to their degree course and adventure industry career aspirations, reflective of vocational habitus and related activities in sailing, watersports and climbing, synonymous with the HEI location. This suggested that vocational environments within the HEI did have some bearing, as Grant reaffirmed “there was quite a big appeal at having the water sports centre”. Other participants discussed location more generically, the student lifestyle that they sought and the physical layout of the city. As Hannah corroborated, “I wanted a good balance of social life and good uni life and nice area”. This introduced the power of factors external to their learning before they had begun their HE life, and which became a substantial issue effecting their experiences, engagements and overall undergraduate journey.

Many participants expressed the importance of getting as far away from family and their homes and reinforcing their need for escapism and independence. This is emerging pattern is summarised in Lance’s comment, “I just wanted to be as far away from home as possible”. In contrast a couple of participants wanted to be away but not too far from loved ones, reinforcing the anxiety that some were feeling at this early stage in their journey and the conflict between independence and low self-esteem. Terry’s statement encapsulates this: “I wanted to get as far as possible but as close as possible so I could go home whenever I want”. This shows again the dichotomy between defiance and conformity, and whether to push beyond the horizon, an undercurrent which was embedded throughout this study.
Image and atmosphere emerged as powerful influences on the decision to come to this university. This was through first-hand experience at open days as well as through word of mouth and other research undertaken. Open days proved particularly positive, although as Toby candidly described, this was despite his dislike of the initial appearance on arrival:

“I was driving with my mum and the traffic was really bad and you know I was in a really grumpy mood and then [HEI] arrived and it was a disgusting looking building and I was really anti, I don’t wanna go here this looks awful, it’s a horrid city … we parked and ran in … it was with the session you were running actually, and actually I had a really good time, it was quite, quite interesting actually, once coming in and speaking to you and speaking to other students … my initial, this is a disgusting uni was actually, I quite like this, I am fairly sure I wanna go here”

As Toby demonstrated, an open day could be powerful for an individual’s final HEI selection, but also reaffirms the changeable nature of participants. Open day experiences were repeatedly mentioned through pre-HE discussions. Specifically, it demonstrated an academic-cultural fit between these participant’s profiles and an institution described as offering an approachable and friendly atmosphere. Debbie described how she was not overwhelmed “I felt I could come here and not feel massively intimidated I guess”. This indicated shared institutional habitus, with participants feeling part of a wider culture and where the stigma of being non-traditional learners disappeared.

When asked about reservations some participants acknowledged status and reputation and mentioned terms like Russell Group, red brick universities and related ratings and league tables. These are examples of the power of the macro-environment regarding structural HE forces and how class and academic status effected this type of non-traditional group. However, the resounding conclusion was that despite their selected university not being Russell Group and/or high in academic league tables it had little influence on final decision-making. Instead, it only strengthened their act of defiance in selecting a university that went against the recommendations of schools/colleges and family and the wider macro-environment. Noelle explained:
“I wasn’t bothered at all ... you can get some people who have done the best degree and they’re really academic but then when it comes to the doing stuff as a person, they are completely flat ... it’s more about what you do with it and how you deal with the degree as opposed to where you get it from”

Other extracts acknowledged the specialist nature of the course which narrowed down their choice of university as Matt reflected:

“I didn’t really understand much about how the kind of uni rating system worked, I didn’t want to go too much on what people said because I knew that, I know it sounds bad to say it, but I felt like it wouldn’t matter anyway, and I didn’t have a choice because I didn’t want to do any other course”

External forces such as reputation and status of an HEI were secondary to the course and Noelle reinforced this recognising its uniqueness, “cos’ there is only one place you can really do this degree ... it’s not offered anywhere else” Noelle and Matt showed that the course was the main feature in decision-making and this was substantive in all participants university selection. For Lance, the course content overrode any other factors “I looked at the course provided here, and I was like, ok, its outdoors but it offers management as well and that kind of opens two sorts of massive doors”. Appendix M provides further supporting extracts relating to HEI location, impact of open days, pressures to escape and reputation which demonstrate different factors influencing participants’ decision-making in HE selection.

The vocational nature of the title and content was particularly influential and reflected the characteristics, learner dispositions and lifestyle of this cohort and reaffirmed by Terry “I was always interested in adventure sports and fun stuff like that, bouncing around”. However, the most influential aspect was less vocational elements as Terry explained “this one intrigued me the most, business-y and kind of a management course and you can take it down any direction”. The findings exposed a powerful collective acknowledgement on the importance of management within the course. Every participant referred to
management highlighting the importance in decision-making. Extracts in Appendix N highlight the magnitude of this. Despite vocational characteristics and learner dispositions of this group, all noted the benefit of pursuing a management course as opposed to a more practical degree and this became a deciding factor. As Matt noted, “management is a big word that the skill is transferable so for me it was definitely the course that influenced my choice to come here”. This sentiment was shared by most participants and whilst they aspired for a vocationally based course, they still wanted a higher academic and professional standing. Whether this was feelings of inferiority toward more traditional, academic studies, was unclear but not an unfounded conclusion.

Discussion around finances varied, with some participants identifying finance as a reason for progressing HE. As Hannah noted: “I believe you’re going to end up with a minimum wage job ... and you’re not going to do well for yourself in life”. Here aspects of the socio-economic, macro-environment, are evident, relating to the potential, and expectations of, graduates and their role as symbolic capital within the greater economic world. Family status and these socio-economic structural influences are often interconnected “even when I was a little kid they [mum and dad] never really had any money”. In this example Hannah noted witnessing her parents own struggle financially and things they “could never afford” which contributed to her decision-making to go to university and to break away from the constraints of her class and status in society. Another example of family and financial interconnections came from Noelle’s reference to her stepdad’s opinion: “he said I wouldn’t be able to afford it and I was going to get myself into too much debt. To them it was just, it’s gonna cost a lot of money and a lot of debt, cos’s that’s what you hear, and in the newspapers, so there was a lot of ignorance”. Whilst Noelle’s situation was different to Hannah’s there was a synergy in power and influence of structural forces from the fields in which they were placed.

Money was acknowledged by several other participants, as a factor of consideration, although it was not prominent or a primary factor. As Gary states:
“money has an aspect to it, obviously because I’m paying nine grand a year, and all the extra... but I don’t think that’s anything that motivates me... but I know, in the back of my mind... I’ve got to work hard, it’s too much money not to”

Acknowledgement that it “costs a lot” (Debbie) and tuition fees was noted by some participants. However, it was not a substantive topic and many participants either didn’t mention money or did so in passing, linked to living arrangements. Despite this, Hannah and Noelle did reveal that for some, the subconscious influence of their role as socio-economic and cultural capital, fuelled by structural influences which continued throughout the HE journey.

4.7 Summary

Chapter 4 has provided the foundations in understanding the background of participants, and how it impacted on learner transitions, trajectories and decision-making pre-HE. Chapter 5 now explores their journey into HE, EE opportunities offered over their three years and what impact this had on professional self-efficacy, learner identity and careership. The complex and often conflicting behaviours expressed by Noelle, Gary and peers as they battled between conforming and defying their pre-determined horizons for actions are further examined through their reflections and conclusions as they neared graduation.
Chapter 5  Student Perspectives on EE and Reflections Post-HE (themes 2-4)

It was clear from the data that the vocational habitus guided participants to the undergraduate course, satisfying their adventurous passions through work related learning. This chapter now presents the participant perspectives of employer engagement (EE) opportunities that were key to their learner journey and how this impacted on their personal and professional development. This includes the positive impact industry engagement had on their HE experiences, strengthening horizons for action and informing learner trajectories and subsequent careership. The shared wanderlust of the group (wanting to escape, travel and explore) revealed in pre-HE discussions highlight potential problems for HEIs and employers as some participants were still unsure of their direction post-graduation. For some, it was due to their want to fulfil personal travel aspirations before embarking on a career, whereas others were indecisive due to the breadth of choice in an expanding industry. Furthermore, whilst the whole cohort spoke positively about EE opportunities, confusion in the terminology used by universities and other stakeholders was unanimous.

It should be noted that through analysis of findings, a number of patterns and themes emerged which were beyond the scope of my study and the associated research aim and objectives. These centred around the huge influence of life outside of university and how factors unrelated to EE, the university, course or curriculum could have substantial impact on an individual’s learner journey and their wider life. One of the challenges I faced during analysis and preparation of these findings, was having to omit so much fascinating, thought provoking and unforeseen material. However, despite being enthralled, and on reflection, somewhat distracted by this additional content, I had to be ruthless in my research approach and only draw out examples that were relatable to the study. In places I have made comments to the wider topics that emerged and I have referred to additional material in the appendix where I felt it was appropriate to highlight further examples. I have also identified this as an area for future exploration in my recommendations.
5.1 Student understanding of employer engagement terminology (theme 2)

EE terminology is used frequently across HE in promotion and marketing and no more so than my post-92 university. This connects directly with this study cohort in responding to their vocational habitus, contributing to their learner trajectories and career aspirations for more practical, work-based experiences. I felt it was important to explore participants’ understanding of this terminology to establish whether this aligned with HE (meso) level and macro stakeholder (government and industry) expectations who see graduates as social and economic capital. Three categories emerged from the data covering definitions, industry perspectives and example activities (see Appendix O).

5.1.1 Definitions, understanding and initial EE examples

During focus groups participants used a flip chart to illustrate understanding of key terms. Appendix P presents these images and shows that through peer discussion, they recognised key activities associated with EE, real-world and vocational learning. Specifically, placements, guest speakers, networking and use of ‘Linkedin’ and alumni, were identified. However, content was limited, and overlapped between terms, indicating participants found it difficult to differentiate between them.

Preferred terms were discussed and showed different perspectives individuals have on EE provision. These interactions between Matt and Toby reflect this discord:

“Employer engagement makes it sound like we said, like that they are coming to give us a job, whereas if it’s industry engagement” (Matt) [interrupts] “I don’t like the word industry, it implies that it’s all a business and that’s not the direction I would like to take with it” (Toby). “going back to the employer / industry think, um, I think there are a lot of people on the degree, like it’s kind of people, have different ideas, some people don’t want to be an employee as such, a lot of people they want to go off and do their own thing, maybe set up a business” (Matt).
This inability to agree on EE terminologies continued in interviews and as Hilary recognised, “I think there are just loads of different ways they can be said....maybe stuff like real world learning is probably easier”. Understanding of real-world learning was greater among participants seeing a direct link between themselves, employers and their own careership as Bonnie explained: “real-world learning is like applying things you learn in the classroom to actual ... um going out and talking to people that work in the industry”. Despite some appropriate interpretations, definitions were largely superficial and inconsistent and as demonstrated by Hannah, were rarely differentiated: “professional experience and real-world learning ... I believe they’re the same thing”. This further demonstrated the confusion and conflict of views that existed.

Participants like Lance confused EE with ‘employee’ engagement, assuming it referred to work relations: “it’s like the employer actually getting involved with members of staff”. Bonnie similarly described it as, “the relationship the employer has with the employers” and Kile who questioned rather than clarified, “how you keep your employers engaged and interested?” Professional experience was also misinterpreted: “um, courses that do kind of sandwich and things maybe?” (Terry) or “how all staff have big industry backgrounds and lecturers add more bulk to what they’re saying” (Matt). Here Matt misunderstood the term and like others, linked it to staff perspectives as opposed to aiding learner career progression. Conversely, some participants appropriately defined examples such as placements, guest speakers and trips although struggled to differentiate between them as illustrated in Appendix Q.

Three sub-themes emerged in definitions two of which were most eloquently summarised by Gary. Firstly, ‘EE as a form of relationship building’: “it’s how I engage with them and how they engage with me”, and secondly, ‘EE as an opportunity to apply theory to practice’, or as Gary states, “they sort of contextualise learning”. Other participants agreed with this perspective and the third sub-theme associated with EE enhancing employability through outputs like employability skills. Despite participants acknowledging the general benefits of EE, when asked specifically about employability skills, further confused or limited interpretations ensued (see Appendix R). Toby’s response that it “turns your brain off” perhaps best reflected the tone and how participants were not only confused but
exhausted by terms. Nevertheless, others like Terry, contradicted this, “I don’t think there is enough push, in your face to understand it more, maybe if there was a workshop on it ... there might have been but I missed it and just wasn’t listening [laughs]”. Terry’s perspective also demonstrated the challenge of meeting participant needs, particularly with their admission of non-engagement, a pattern examined in more depth later.

In summary, the limited responses from participants on EE definitions showed the struggle to differentiate terms conceptually, involving professional experience, real-world learning through to the intended outcomes in enhancing employability skills. Whilst this did not affect participants embarking on EE opportunities as part of their journey it does raise concerns if there are miscommunications and misinterpretations of EE at the micro level in comparison with meso/macro perspectives.

5.1.2 Participant perceptions on the wider (macro stakeholder) agenda

Participant responses were limited on the bigger picture of EE and indicated that for many, they were oblivious to national expectations. It was evident that a gap exists between participant understanding of EE on the frontline (micro level) and the contribution it makes in achieving strategic policy at macro level. A minority of participants acknowledged benefits to industry and HEI collaborations, but this was little to do with wider societal and economic contributions and more to do with the benefits that they saw industry gaining by working with universities. Extracts in Appendix S shows the breadth of perspectives and disparity of opinion. As Hannah reflected on the national perspective regarding their socio-economic responsibility, “I’ve never really thought about it like that”, a sentiment shared by participants. Bonnie was the closest to show a more universal awareness:

“there’s a lot of talk about graduates, and they don’t get a job, because, for various reasons, and so I think the communication between a possible employer and student is really important because in a government sense, you’re , you’ve got all these educated people and they are not using their education ... that’s why it’s really important ... the benefit of everybody”
Here she touched upon the societal perspective and the importance of graduates securing appropriate level positions to contribute effectively in the national interest. However, Bonnie’s more informed perspective was in the minority and for most, atypical. Discussion from other participants centred on marketing opportunities that EE collaborations offered, for example, as consumers: “I think promoting to us not only as potential workers but also as potential clients” (Noelle), as well as recruitment opportunities, “it opens up our ideas of them ... when they are trying to recruit people” (Debbie). A few participants acknowledged how industry gained a better insight into universities and what graduates offered, as Toby reflected “it allows them to see the future of their worlds, if that makes sense? Cos we are the people that are going to be moving into their businesses”. There was a subtle undertone from participants that was more about ‘what the industry could do for them’ instead of self-identifying as social and economic capital to offer valuable contributions to society and in responding to labour market forces.

Participant views on the macro picture were disparate, although there was consensus that EE provided two-way benefits, as Hilary reflected: “It’s important to us to know what’s out there and what’s going on but I think it’s also important for like employers, and having graduates going straight into the job in their field”. This reinforces how clear, unambiguous and transparent EE terminology is needed across the tripartite.

5.2 The HE learner journey and participant perspectives on EE experiences (theme 3)

Integral to the research question these findings bridge the gap between the participants’ habitus, and original pre-HE dispositions, and learner identities exposed in Chapter 4. It draws on participant reflections of EE conceptually and practically (see Appendix T) and how this developed over three years. It concludes by exploring how EE experiences informed post-HE careers aspirations, and whether this shaped an individual’s future direction and horizons for action.
5.2.1 General reflections on HE learning and external life experiences

Participants recognised the positive impact that the overall HE experience had on their personal development, learner trajectories, and professionally for careers post-graduation. This included enhancement of academic skills, competencies and knowledge, admission of difficulties and challenges faced, as well as reflection on specific EE activities. This provided useful background and understanding of a participant’s wider HE journey (see Appendix U).

Some interview discussion centred around life outside the academic environment and whilst this wasn’t directly relevant to EE, Lance showed how important other aspects of their learner journey was: “I think the main thing, that kind of makes you employable from uni is decisions that you make outside of uni whilst you’re here for the 3 years, cos’ it’s while your independent”. Recurring participant discussion included initial experiences in the first few weeks of arriving at university (trepidation, loneliness etc), issues surrounding living arrangements, social interactions, development of friendships/relationships, participation in clubs and societies and ongoing financial concerns. As encapsulated by Kile: “I'd say in first year I guess sort of the experiences of moving away from home, more independence, sort of making lots of new friends”. Positive and negatives participant experiences were expressed during discussions showing how wider external factors were inextricably linked to the learner journey, although this digresses beyond the scope of this study.

Social and personal experiences were substantial, and participants described a range of situations, both course- and EE-related, such as trips, placements and practical activities as well as general life situations. These factors permeated across all aspects of the university life. Course and peer relationships were a substantial topic and participants reflected on initial meetings, engagement with welcome week, fresher activities, house sharing, through to the development of longer term relationships. The strength of relationships within the group reinforced the shared characteristics and vocational habitus and as Lance described, how the course adopted “a kind of like ... wolf pack mentality” with others, like Hannah referring to it as being part of a “family”. It was evident these connections evolved over
the three years resulting in deep routed friendships and tight bonds. Exposing patterns in social and personal development experiences was important as positive and negative factors often impacted on participant take up of EE activities. Developing friendships, relationships, subsequent conflict, peer pressure, and the distraction of societies and the social scene were all prominent which impacted engagement at times. Appendix V presents general discussion, whilst more in depth examples of how these social and personal reflections transpired through EE activities are now explored.

5.2.2 EE activities in practice

By far the most impactful EE experience was the five-day residential field trip to an Outdoor Centre in the South West. Scheduled in the sixth week of the course it combines exposure to an adventure centre to observe and participate in outdoor pursuits, with career talks and an opportunity for developing technical, personal and social skills. When asked about prominent memories, every participant referred to it on numerous occasions. Matt reflected the views of the cohort and how this work-based EE experience allowed theory to be applied to practice:

“it was a really interesting situation, I mean socially and like, looking at it from kind of theoretical perspectives…like Tuckman’s stages of development and you start noticing what the hell’s going on, and you start to think about these things in real life”

Social development was also a key outcome as Hannah reflected:

“everyone will say [Outdoor Centre Residential] [laughs] … that really helped our course … our course is a bit different really and our year, we were all much closer … we all joined together and obviously there’s a lot of friendships and stuff that have formed … helped everyone’s confidence, you get to know the real person especially on outdoor activities as we all know it’s about teamwork and communication”
Responses were unanimously positive and the residential was a defining moment in cohort bonding and social cohesion. Also, individuals became aware of shared interests which reinforced vocational habitus through collective passions in lifestyle and adventurous pursuits. As demonstrated by Lance “everybody being like-minded ... I was always the one doing stupid stuff, jumping off this and jumping off that, and seeing everybody, like the same. It was nice”. Grant also noted how it offered team bonding on “quite a sort of ‘out there’ course”. This further built upon the shared vocational attributes which emerged.

Whilst social interactions were dominant in discussion, the benefits of satisfying specific EE objectives, such as application of theory to practice and networking to secure future placements was magnified. As Toby highlighted, “you understand the background of an outdoor centre ... they were tailoring everything to, this is how we do it and this is why we do it, we see how the business is run”. Kile and Bonnie referred to peer successes in securing placements directly from the residential trip, “Gary got a job out of it ... and Henry got a job out of it” This demonstrated the networking potential these trips offered and how participants acknowledged this benefit (see Appendix W).

The main purpose of EE activities such as offsite visits was to enable participants to forge links with professionals. Participants were very aware of the EE objectives and purpose of these activities. Gary showed this:

“from a sort of real-world point of view...they’ve always been relevant ... it’s never been, let’s go caving and have fun, that’s part of it but then it goes into the managerial side where we have meetings ... we still think about it whether we realise it or not...they are things that we, you know, hone back into like essays”

Other participants agreed, like Lance, who acknowledged how a field trip had been “really informative” and how the manager of the centre had been inspirational “[he] was talking about his business and how he started from this, how it grew, that was really good”. Most participants praised the quality of EE trips and how a visit to a work-based environment,
engaged participants by seeing the bigger picture of an organisation. Lance’s reflection on a trip to a sky-diving centre emphasised this: “we get to see the extremes of the industry, the heavy commercialised side of it”. This demonstrated a critical understanding of experiential learning to aid knowledge of the industry and fuelling learner trajectories to inform future career aspirations.

Most were aware that EE trips were more than just an opportunity to participate in outdoor pursuits. Bonnie reaffirmed this “they’re not just going off for a jolly” and describing it as “orchestrated ... it’s relevant to what we are talking about in class which is really important in uni”. National Governing Bodies qualifications (NGBs) were raised by several participants, but not as an EE activity and instead, as an added employability opportunity. Bonnie acknowledged that practical activities alone cannot be justified in HE but feature as part of a deeper learning experience. Social benefits were highlighted and many, like Hilary, noted how it brought the cohort together when academic pressures grew: “we’ve got so much work and we are not in as much ... we don’t see each other a lot now ... it brought us altogether ... everyone is talking a lot more again”. Kile agreed although he noted how social experiences outside the trip had been important, “even like the curry house, even everyone doing that was good fun and hanging out, more a social aspect”. This demonstrated how less tangible outcomes were substantial in the learner journey and wider university life. Shared interests and close bonds reinforced the vocational habitus of this group and strengthened a collective social fit to the adventure industry they aspired to work in. It also built personal confidence and resilience by supporting participants alongside the challenges and pressure of HE studies. As Terry reflected, a trip offsite “relieves the stress ... gets you out of [the city] to a new place”.

Other participants agreed that trips became a distraction and as Toby noted, allowed him to “relax in a new environment” but also noting the networking benefits “it is good cos’ you get to go out and if you do want to work for a certain business you get to go and meet the faces behind them”. Trips offsite provided tangible outcomes in career opportunities, but also responded to personal and social needs and a chance for escapism from academic learning, reaffirming this collective vocational habitus and associated characteristics.
Discussion surrounding placements were substantial and participants reinforced personal, social and professional benefits. As Lance relayed:

“well my work experience was good. I could see like, um, so, you know, we would use a lot of theories and application…I could see more clearly when I worked there…it really helped in that field and I learnt a lot form the placement as well as how to manage people”

Participants like Lance were aware of experiential work-based opportunities and how academic theory could be contextualised in a vocational setting. Appendix X provides an overview of the placement unit and associated assessment that the participants undertook. Participants discussed logistics of preparation, planning and the diversity of opportunity as well as more profound discourse about individual experiences and how it affected them personally. As Noelle reflected, “I think it made me grow up more”. The impact on participant confidence was prominent and Debbie exemplified this: “most people I’ve spoken to would say their placement has helped their confidence, because even if it was bad they know that’s helped them be more confident in what they do or what they don’t wanna do”. She went on to describing being “thrown in at the deep end” demonstrating that whilst not always positive, placements developed self-esteem and resilience, characteristics that were a challenge for some participants, pre-HE. Other participants concurred, describing the power of engaging in real life professional settings which strengthened employability skills and subsequently influenced agency and careership.

Participants often reflected on wider life and socio-cultural influences and whilst not directly related to an EE activity it came as an indirect consequence as Kile reflected:

“I gained a lot, confidence, more people skills, cos’ obviously going to a different country and not knowing anyone there, and then having to sort, sort of building friendships again, and then obviously different countries, different cultures...different ways of doing things and getting into their way of doing things”
Participants’ emphasised the importance of secondary benefits. Noelle’s description of the logistical aspects of a placement abroad exemplified this:

“I was sort of wowed by what was out there and what you can do and where you can go, I think my biggest most memorable experiences was that moment I got on a coach on my own for the first time, and then I got on a plane on my own for the first time … and the moment I actually stepped out of the plane”

These wider life-experiences were substantial and, whether it was being immersed in a different culture or travel logistics, the experiences had profound impact. Matt, emphasised the enormity of traveling alone, referring to it as “life changing … properly feeling like an adult”, and recalling the inexperience, and lack of confidence some participants had before coming to university.

Social interaction and relationships were reoccurring topics when participants talked about placements and Noelle experience was particularly insightful as she explained why she returned to the same organisation year on year “It’s kind of, sort of my family at the moment, I go back there because they, they bring me back down to earth”. The relationship formed with her placement supervisor challenged her family norms and she talked about the influence of her mother growing up, but how this changed through the placement and specifically her supervisor “she challenged me so much on my thoughts and perception … she’s challenged me in a lot of different ways and sort of made me more confident”. For Noelle the placement was life-changing and broadened views beyond structural family influences. Whilst not all participants had such a profound experience, many made reference to the overall environment and holistically, as Terry concluded: “so it’s like the little things that build up and make you kind of who you are, it’s just the camp environment and it’s just the memories you have there”.

Knowledge gained in the field was also substantial in participant reflections. This was both through observation and in specific roles undertaken, as Lance described “they gave us a lot more of an in depth view of how they worked...when I went back this year I made
an effort to just ask questions”. It also provided a deeper insight and challenged participants to stretch their capabilities, as Toby described “my job turned into quite a management role … I had quite a bit of free rein”. Appendix Y provide further examples of these shared perspectives and the breadth of experiences and knowledge gained. For some, like Hilary it helped galvanise ideas about future careers “it probably helped me to see that I probably wouldn’t want to do something in that field in the future”. Some participants were critical of their placements, but this was not negatively expressed, instead like Hilary they recognised the value in informing careership. Those reluctant to undertake a placement also gained benefits retrospectively as Gary admitted: I’m glad you made me [laughs]... I wouldn’t have otherwise ... I’d have just sat around”. Gary not only voluntarily returned a year later but also secured a permanent position “it was such a good experience that I wanted to go back ... and at the end I got offered a job”. Others saw this potential and as Terry expressed “I’ve got contacts all around the world now”. Further extracts on networking benefits, is presented in Appendix Z.

Talks by industry professionals also featured repeatedly and many participants described benefits of this style of EE to support learning. As Lance explained “I think it’s brilliant that we ... that we do get speakers come in from, like our sector, they come in and they’ve got all this experience”. Others shared this enthusiasm and breadth of learning, as Gary mused:

“in the first and second years, having those people come in and talk, regardless of whether you’re taking their placement, you’re still learning something about their business, you’re learning how they work, how they present, you’re learning how to present and how to market a business”

The variety of speakers was highlighted how this broadened industry knowledge and career potential. These professional interactions demonstrated crucial conduits building vocational identities through shared expertise. Hannah referred to speakers as an opportunity of “seeing what’s out there” and echoed by Hilary: “it makes people realise ... there’s opportunities that they didn’t thin were out there ... they maybe see
themselves going down a different path or into a different place”. This showed how exposure to industry expanded previously constrained horizons.

Participants were generally positive about speakers despite some mixed responses. For example, “I think there’s, there’s some of them that talk to us, just because they ... they wanna sell their job to us kind of thing” (Lance). This relates to participant (mis)understanding of EE terminology and the limited awareness of the bigger picture relating to macro stakeholders and the importance of tripartite agreements which benefit all parties. Some participants were critical of speakers’ delivery, as Hilary noted, “there’s maybe a couple that weren’t quite as good ... obviously some people don’t speak as well”. Meeting individual needs, interests and general career aspirations was also raised, showing how some participants struggled to see the bigger picture if it didn’t directly engage them: “sometimes it might not be what you wanna do, but it will be what someone else wants to do ” (Lara). In contrast, Lance was more critical and dogmatic:

“no offense but half of them bored me, the content, because half of them weren’t for me and I was just like ... I’m not getting anything from this, it was interesting to hear what they were doing I spose’ but it wasn’t for me!”

This contrast between Lara and Lance was reflective of the varying opinions participants had on EE activities and demonstrates the difficulty in satisfying all needs and wants as part of their learner journey. Despite vocational habitus, other elements of their individuality, influenced opinion and engagement including work ethic, commitment to the timetable and attendance and differing priorities (such as social or club events taking priority above EE opportunities).

Participants were most complimentary about speakers who engaged them and were passionate, showing the power of professional structural forces. Terry reflected on one speaker “he was good ... he was interested in the same stuff that we were interested in” or where participants felt a connection when alumni visited: “I think because he had obviously been to the uni and had done the course, it was really helpful cos he kinda knew
what we were looking for” (Hilary). However, whilst, participants agreed that talks were beneficial to learning, ultimately, their impact to aid career aspirations was very individual. Kile demonstrated this: “most of them are useful and we get a wide range … and choosing which ones are relevant to you … it depends on what you are interested in doing after”. Participant preferences impacted on appreciation and potential disengagement. Despite acknowledging the benefits there were differences on how they were received, dependent on the organisation. This shows the complexity in providing breadth of EE opportunities; some participants recognised it positively, supporting the notion of expanding horizons and contributing to careership, but could also be negative, where participants did not see the relevance.

One participant demonstrated the full potential that EE activities provided in enhancing learner trajectories and establishing a subsequent career path. In this case an initial industry talk resulted in Matt securing a job alongside his studies and later, establishing his own business. Matt’s story is unique but showed what could be achieved with a successful tripartite collaboration:

“So [outdoor company] came in and I got to meet the guy who runs it and that pretty much started a whole bunch of stuff…I got a job out of that…I’m making a good amount of money out of that, doing all sorts of stuff, it’s kind of like I am helping him to do all the business development side”

Matt’s success also had a positive impact on his peers who acknowledged his achievements: “Matt did exactly that, he basically got a job... I’d say that’s the main benefits of them” (Debbie). Whilst Matt’s experience was individual, it highlights how impactful an EE learning experience can be, not only on the individual, but also the ripple effect on others observing.

When reflecting on EE experiences, participants also identified specific modules with a real-world theme that captured their interest. As Lance reflected, “subjects like the contemporary issues, I think that’s very important … it gives you the knowledge of what’s
going on in the field, um, and what’s changing”. This highlighted the value that participants saw in vocational subjects and assessment briefs. Gary described an assessment he was proud of which emphasises this point:

> “when I wrote about the company in Pakistan, I loved that, it was a whole different thing. I can see how this might be relevant to me one day and I understand wholly that one day I might start my own business”

The integration and alignment of industry related topics aided contextualisation of theory to practice and this was positively received in responding to the cohort’s vocational habitus. Participants acknowledged the application of academic theory to real-life scenarios and how this not only engaged learning but allowed deeper reflection on their EE experiences as Debbie described, “they all sort of relate to real life [assessments] as you’re writing about real life situations”. This statement also indicates the potential ambiguity about what constitutes real-world learning and how it is referred to quite loosely. Nevertheless, participants were supportive of learning which featured a work-based scenario and as Gary highlights, how it can aid critical and evaluative skills:

> “by doing a dissertation it forces us … and allows us to link back, which goes into our employer engagement again. So obviously when we come back from placements we do these presentations, we do essays but we analyse and sort of evaluate the things we did and why they are relevant … it’s not just, this is what it is and I hope you learn something, it’s, this is what it is and this is what you learnt whether you realise it or not, and by linking those two together, it’s those two ladders again, you go up a bit and then you look at the academic side and they you look at the theory behind it”

To summarise, participant reflections exposed deep connections between EE activities and their wider university life, aiding their professional development and employability. This included extrinsic influences, such as networking and gaining organisational knowledge, as well as intrinsically and personally in building confidence, self-esteem, and related employability skills. By developing academically and professionally and learning to contextualise theory within the workplace, participants have demonstrated more critical
and evaluative skills. Therefore, building self-belief inwardly, which manifests outwardly through a strengthened reputation, values and professionalism that they offer the adventure industry as a vocational graduate.

5.2.3 Non-engagement in EE opportunities

Disengagement focused on lack of personal drive and the influence of course peers and the social scene. Mostly participants on the course described themselves as close, but there were a couple on the periphery, like Lara, “my problem was I didn’t come in, I think the trips are great, it’s not anxiety, but I don’t really gel with the class ... I don’t really put enough effort in”. Lara described a perpetual cycle, acknowledging that her poor attendance affected her ability to interact with course peers, resulting in her disengagement with EE activities and subsequently impacting on her learning experience. Terry revealed external factors, “all my house went out and peer pressure dragged me out and by that time it was 4 am or 5am in the morning”, whereas Kile blamed his recreational passions, “if I hadn’t gone sailing I would have gone”. This emphasised the conflict between studying and participating in vocational subjects. Structural forces associated to university societies and the social scene were consistently raised, evidencing how this could distract from EE opportunities.

Involvement in EE activity was dependent on a complex web of factors relating to the individual, course and peer relationships as well as wider university life. Terry’s candid reflection on an industry talk provided one example to demonstrate this unpredictability. He was adamant he did not want to engage and then was surprised by his own response:

“If someone said to me do you want to come to this speech on this survival thing I would probably be like, no, I’ve got better things on my hands to do, but the fact that we were forced to go and then when you’re actually at the experiences it’s like, it’s actually good, and that’s the point, when you are actually getting the stuff that makes you realise it’s worth it”
The reluctance of participants to commit with EE activities was limited but as Lance reasoned: “oh probably nothing to do with you guys, if I don’t wanna do something ... if I don’t see something with any value to myself ... that sounds so selfish! [laughs]”. This resulted in an apologetic tone as participants recognised opportunities missed “yeah but, I do regret not getting involved in a lot of things cos that’s what uni is about isn’t it?” (Lara). Pressure of academic deadlines was a reason for non-engagement by a few, as Nel admitted “I was stressed ... I was in the library the night before, quarter to eleven, like, I can’t go on this Wales trip, I’ve got a dissertation, oh jeesh!”.

This reinforces the challenges HEIs have in providing a balance of academic and vocational experiences which enhances learning, satisfies diverse needs but does not overpower or add pressure to both a learner’s university and wider life. Overall non-engagement discussion was limited, random and included changeable perspectives and a lack of any predictable or systematic emergence of patterns that could aid or improve EE disengagement in the future.

5.2.4 Learner wants and demands

Participant expectations and demands on their overall HE experience was a reoccurring pattern. There was unanimous agreement on the importance of placements specifically and the benefits they bring (see Appendix AA). The whole cohort referred to the importance of this compulsory element although opinion was mixed on whether there should be more than one placement and how it should be delivered. Matt stated, “I think the first placement needs to be compulsory ... I don’t feel there needs to be more than one” whilst others like Noelle disagreed, suggesting they would have preferred further placements: “if we had a compulsory placement in the second and third year”. Some participants did pursue further placements, but this was voluntary and not curriculum forced. For some, this flexibility was ineffective, especially those lacking self-motivation, and as Gary admitted “you kinda fall out of it very easily if you’re not in it [placement] if I was told to do something I would do it ... it probably would have benefited me more than working in a bar”. Whilst some were happy with choice, others preferred more direction. Gary expanded his views, but exposed a lack of clarity in what exactly he preferred: “you should use a word instead of compulsory but make it compulsory [laughs] make it not sound compulsory, we’ve got a lot of time off, and I do think we all use it in ... good ways but maybe not the best”. Gary’s statement reflected his peers showing complex participants
needs and often contradictory suggestions. Whilst they wanted structure and control enforced by the degree, they also wanted choice.

Some participants indicated confusion on the placement format. The curriculum offers participants the choice of completing more than one placement for their assessment and this could be arranged flexibly. Despite this, some, like Grant, made suggestions for change, whilst not realising it was already possible: “maybe ... you split it up so you do 100 hours one place and then you do 100 hours another place just so you get a good, like a broader focus”. This was similar when participants discussed seasonality, like Hilary who described placements as “very seasonally specific”, stating “if I had the choice I probably would have done something to do with skiing”. However, this exposed a lack of understanding as placements could be in any holiday periods and/or time outside of the academic timetable. Similarly, Hilary suggested more guidelines or documentation to aid preparation, despite a handbook already existing. This revealed a concerning communication issue between the HEI and participants.

Participants were unanimous in their positivity of EE opportunities, but in several cases a more demanding undertone was evident as Noelle exemplified: “it would be really nice to have a bunch of different employers that are coming and doing actual talks ... maybe a bit more, um, like exciting”. Despite an extensive programme of networking opportunities already established, participants still desired more. Grant echoed, this suggesting talks by huge “global companies” but offering little justification. Improvement in course and curriculum development and EE opportunities also revealed further random and individual requests, with little explanation as to why or how they would enhance the learner experience. In many cases suggestions were made by participants who had not engaged in many of the EE opportunities already offered yet still wanted more and often on a grander scale. Terry encapsulated these insatiable demands: “a proper surf weekend, or doing something completely different like proper climbing, maybe real skydiving as well” getting carried away with the enthusiasm for adventurous pursuits and reaffirming the pull of vocational habitus.
Some participants were pragmatic and openly recognised the difficulties of catering for differing demands. As Gary noted “you never say no to more trips [laughs] …but …um … from our point of view, yeah, there’s definitely the right amount”. Even Lance who had been more forthright, acknowledged the challenges faced by HEIs “I mean, I know it’s difficult for you guys because obviously some people just don’t turn up or because of um, because of the … logistical side of it”. Overall it demonstrated that despite shared cohort characteristics and strong vocational habitus, individual demands still varied. Whilst some participants proposed well informed suggestions, as the placement discussions demonstrated, others were largely unsubstantiated and appeared a superficial wish list of sky-diving, surfing and guest talks from global brands, with little rationale as to how it would aid their learning.

5.2.5 HEI Employability Service and employability questionnaire

Participants’ awareness and engagement with the university’s Employability Service varied. An online survey used to review and evaluate their employability skills across the course also had limited appeal. Participants knew of the Employability Service but were confused or unclear about what it offered: “I know a little bit about … they kind of promote jobs, they offer advice … um services … and I don’t know exactly what services (Lance). At best participants had a superficial understanding of the service, some suggesting “…maybe if you promoted it more” (Hilary). This reaffirmed participant expectations for the HEI to direct them more. Other participants were aware of the service yet still demonstrated a general apathy. Lara exemplified this: “Oh, I’ve heard this, um, I don’t know, I’ve seen it on the portal and stuff” further echoed by Hannah “I know they come in every now and then, I know they flag up on a couple of emails, I couldn’t tell you where to find them in the university”. Of those with some knowledge of the services offered, most chose not to access it, or were aware of it via emails but did not read content. There were also contradictory comments about how much or how little the services should be promoted, as Lance warned, “If you start shoving it in people’s faces then they will be like, that is just too annoying, I’m not even going to bother”.
Communications were a critical factor and it was clear that email did not reach the audience effectively as typified by Terry “I have received many emails that I haven’t read [laughs]”. Some participants like Hannah were critical of the Employability Service as “not engaging with students enough”. Despite some negativity, there were also many positive comments and the general principle of what it offered, like Noelle who had engaged: “they kind of give you a calm ... give you a grounding, sort of like an advice system, support mechanism”. Noelle’s response also indicated that the Employability Service went beyond tangible careers activity and offered psychological benefits and reassurance as well. Matt provided more detail:

“I knew that the [Employability Service] was there, and I knew about [the Enterprise initiative] so I googled it and found all the information, the mentorship schemes...I thought that was brilliant and above and beyond what I was expecting, and the other stuff...like CV checks and skills is great as well. I might not use that as much”

Matt’s positivity revealed strength in agency and careership and showing his confidence had developed further through the guidance provided. However, this type of response was limited, and it was apparent that participants did not maximise opportunities to engage with the Employability Service. This reaffirms that engagement with the service may be affected by the individual’s strength of careership and future goals at the time. Further supporting evidence showing the views of participants, regarding the HEI’s Employability Service are illustrated in Appendix BB.

The online employability questionnaire issued by the HEI was also largely unknown by participants, despite competing it each year. Most stated that they had no idea what it was or had a vague recollection but could not provide any substance to its purpose. Appendix CC provides details on the test illustrating comparisons between year 1, 2 and 3 of this cohort, and a sample of participant individual reports. It is evident there were small improvements on cohort scores overall each year but these were limited, whilst individual participant reports were inconsistent and fluctuated. A range of participant perspectives on the test were explored and Toby’s response was typical: “I forgot it, I did five minutes after
doing it, I didn’t engage with it at all, I don’t see much point in it. I don’t feel by clicking, um, buttons at a computer can tell you”, he paused with a final line that summed up the problem “I can’t remember what it’s trying to tell me”.

Hilary, like others, argued, “I’m not really sure you can measure employability, it’s probably a good thing to do but I’m not really sure how else you would go about checking”. There was considerable criticism of the rating system, length of test and quantifiable measures. This is encapsulated in Gary’s response:

“I can see why we do it... It could be worthwhile if you’re always consistently in the same mood, but, [laughs] no one is, it’s just one of those things. I feel like my data’s ruined cos’ in the second year I was having a bad day, but there’s no difference if you’re having a good day and if you’re super optimistic, it’s more of a mood test”

This indicates complex multi-layered influences dependent on mood and confidence and specifically participants’ self-perceived employability and future horizons and which is arguably far deeper than what can be captured by a metric approach.

Participants didn’t know how to access results or how to produce graphs to compare year on year. Furthermore, all had shared views on the limitations and weaknesses of self-evaluations which rely on metrics scores to measure employability skills, and as Gary noted, results in a flawed process. Difficulty in remaining focused whilst measuring multiple statements was also highlighted, as Hannah suggested: “less questions ... maybe not a questionnaire, maybe someone coming to talk to you in class”. Toby agreed “It’s such a long winded thing ... it’s not going to get a true answer... I will have made mistakes ... I don’t need a computer to tell me”. Reliability and overall value were repeatedly mentioned, as Matt reaffirmed “I just went through it without thinking about it”, exposing the flaws further.
Conversely, there were a minority of positive comments, but these were superficial. Bonnie observed, “it is useful but people don’t use it ... they don’t really see the benefit of it”. Terry, like many, suggested alternative methods “I think there’s always a better way... if it was more practical and engaging, maybe like an interview...rather than clicking an option”. Gary endorsed this, “it would be good to have something else, maybe alongside that, an interview where you can talk to them”. Overall, discussions were substantive and powerful with every participant criticising quantitative measures for self-evaluation, and instead, preferring open interview style approaches to offer more meaningful reflection and dialogue. Appendix DD provides supporting evidence of participant perspectives on this test.

5.3 Future direction – life path (theme 4)

Participant reflexivity on future aspirations and their life course permeated throughout the findings. EE opportunities, wider course delivery, as well as non-academic and extra-curricular influences affecting life and their future direction post-graduation (see Appendix EE) were concluded and key points are highlighted.

5.3.1 Reflections, attitudes and career aspirations

Participants reflected on their three years, what they learnt, whether they had changed and what their career aspirations were towards the end. Reflections were positive toward their HE journeys, including specific learning opportunities, as well as wider life experiences. Hannah described, “I feel like it’s changed me” and the combination of theory and vocational experiences which had strengthened her careership, “I’ve also got this real world side so it kind of puts me in a comfortable position for what I want to look into in the future”. Others agreed, recognising how their learner journey and exposure to EE experiences had prepared them, fuelling careership with ideas for future goals. As Toby reflected being “a lot more thoughtful and conscientious of what I want to do”. The tone was that of satisfaction and a self-confidence.
Most participants acknowledged how the degree had aided career decision-making and attitudes were more self-assured as they looked beyond graduation. Hilary compared herself to three years ago, “before I came to uni I literally had no clue at all where or what I wanted to do... I know what options there are for me and now I have the skills to go out and do that”. Grant agreed and how the breadth of the degree had opened his eyes, “it’s given me loads of different stuff that I could do... I’ve various different avenues that I could take”. Matt too showed how horizons had been expanded: “it definitely stopped me from being very narrow minded”. Matt also noted the combination of management and vocational abilities, strengthening employability further: “not only have I got the management skills in the things I need to do the job, I’ve got like all this other background experience”. Participants agreed and had a shared confidence in the future as Lance encapsulated:

“I definitely would say my journey has influenced where I aspire to be...I’m thinking about the process of things and why I’m doing things...it’s more cognitive...it has a massive impact, I have a different perspective”

There was still a lack of clear direction for progression after graduation for some. Even those who had been focused on a military career, were all now questioning this pathway, as Toby pondered, “I’m walking down a path and there’s a fork slowly getting wider and wider apart”. This analogy was reflective of many there was still a sense of indecisiveness. In some ways, the breadth of industry learnt through the degree, had led them to question their next move. Shared learner identities and vocational passions fuelled this indecisiveness with many reverting back to a need for escapism and from the conformity of university life as opposed to more institutionalisation. This demonstrates delayed transitions for this cohort as opposed to progressing into employment or further (post-graduate) learning “I don’t know what I wanna do straight after uni, I know I want go away and take a break...something for myself and completely disengage ... the side of me that just wants to go off and explore” (Lance).

A participant’s need for escape and travel, post-graduation was a reoccurring pattern reinforcing shared characteristics pre-HE which remained resolute. This was evident in
Gary’s exposition: “I wanna be happy, in my dream world I wanna go away, I know that at the moment going into a job wouldn’t make me happy… it would just compound issues… it would make me feel, more trapped”. Grant was another participant whose desire to travel at the start of the course, had not subsided “it said where do you wanna be in five years… I think I just said somewhere hot … which is maybe what’s going to happen ... I want to travel more, quite a lot more”. Others shared similar escapist desire whether as part of work “I’m gonna go to Greece for a couple of months, as a water sports instructor” (Nell), or recreationally as Terry stated: “I want to go travelling…save enough money and just go travelling for like six months-year”. Regardless of participants incentive or motivations, shared identifies and behaviours of this adventure cohort appeared to fuel a fateful conclusion. Continued wanderlust and need to seek travel, adventure and exploration as opposed to securing a career based job post-graduation was substantive.

Whist participants had channelled personal passions and dispositions through a degree to allow career goals aligned to the adventure industry, it was clear that employment was not a priority for many, delaying further transitions to pursue personal fulfilment.

There were some exceptions with Hilary, Gary and Matt considering postgraduate education, despite this not being a consideration originally. This showed how HE had built their confidence in academic ability, to consider beyond their original horizon. However, these discussions were again a little indecisive and a Masters was potentially seen as a way of avoiding making career decisions as alluded to by Matt, “It’s kind of ... a difficult decision process, the reason I’m doing it is because it’s a year. It’s straight after uni”. Overall, growth in confidence, independence and self-assurance was shared by participants as they reflected on their three year learner journey and their employability prospects. However, an undercurrent of trepidation on what step to take next, remained, connected to the wanderlust characteristics and a general inability to commit to one pathway. As Terry concluded “well you can’t really plan your life out”.
5.3.2 Impact of Course and EE post-graduation

During reflection participants made the connections between EE and their future path and as Matt noted “you can come out with a degree and it still won’t get you a job... people are looking for experience”. Bonnie agreed “you can get a first in a degree but if you haven’t got any sort of knowledge on how to apply it”. Participants reaffirmed how EE had aided their ability to secure careers post-graduation and recognised the benefits that they had been exposed to. For some like Gary, it was not until they reflected on experiences that they considered more deeply the impact: “I guess a lot of people just brush over, and, until I thought back to it just now... those engagements are super important”. Participants were unanimous in how important they felt work-based experiences were as part of their degree in preparing them for the future. As Toby reflected “I’ve got a degree but I’ve also worked for three months” highlighting how it provided longevity in career promotion to “push you up into that management role”. For Terry, there was an inner-confidence when seeking jobs “employers like you’ve worked abroad...they know you’re good with people and can adapt to different environments”. There were also a few conflicting perspectives like Grant, “it had both good and negative effects on me... I want a degree, but then at the same time ... why am I bothering?”, this suggested a weaker understanding of careership but also linked more widely to the ongoing debate and influence as to whether a degree is needed in the adventure industry.

The academic element of the course was recognised in aiding careership post-graduation and in combination with real-world activity. For example, Debbie’s dissertation research was beneficial “it fits in my sort of area that I want to go into [outdoor company] ... that’s obviously going to help me, um, after uni”. Noelle also reflected how personal and analytical skills were transferable into careers: “You’re constantly analysing your situation and your environment and your thinking about how your personality is effected by different things”. As participants reflected across their three years there was an overall positivity and how their learner journey aided personal and professional development to inform decision-making as they transitioned out of HE into the wider world.
5.3.3 People influences on future direction

Friends and associated relationships featured repeatedly in discussions about the future, although less overt than pre-HE decision-making. Examples included friendships formed during HE and where somebody had specifically inspired a participant’s vision. Noelle described one such friend, “she has thrown me off bridges ... introduced me to like the craziest people ... I think she’s probably my biggest influence” and reaffirming the shared lifestyles and adventurous passions of this group. Friendships and other relationships had the potential to delay employment transitions or re-direct, post-graduation. As Gary admitted, “I don’t know what I wanna do” and whilst he just wanted to escape, his partner wanted to secure a job, although in this case Debbie was adamant their relationship would not impact decision-making “we’re not going to influence each other though”. Despite this, the extract reinforced how relationships could have a bearing on post-graduate decision-making and Lance exemplified this “I’ve got a year to wait before my girlfriend finishes her course and then our plan is to go travelling for a while”. Here, delayed transitions and the impact of careership post-graduation, are demonstrated due to the influence of another person.

The status of friends also had opposing and indirect influence. For example, when referring to friends at home Terry described how: “all my friends live with their parents, they cook for them. I don’t wanna go home, I wanna do my own thing, I wanna get out there and kind of improve myself really”. It was clear that Terry wanted his university independence to continue. Parental influence toward the end of the course was acknowledged, although many like Debbie, suggested it would not impact on final decision-making: “my mum’s been quite a big influence, she said that ... [sighs] she doesn’t want me to stay in [city] after uni but I’m not letting that limit my options”. In other examples, participants were more positive of their parents’ involvement and that they were supportive as opposed to influential, as Gary reflected “my parents would never say no ... my parents know me and how much more driven I am to do these things”. Several participants referred to achievement to satisfy their parents and which exposed an additional pressure “she [mum] just wants to see that graduation...” (Lara). However, many talked of their growing independence and empowerment giving strength, confidence and self-assurance in the decisions they made post-HE. Other influences were associated with employers, and
professional relationships forged during and, in some cases, because of EE activities provided and this substantiated the networking and careership opportunities provided through the programme. Overall, whether personal or professional, it was evident that people surrounding the lives of participants continued to contribute to decision-making but with far less influence than pre-HE.

5.3.4 Finance implications

Discussion about finances was not substantive but one reoccurring topic had some influence on participants and reaffirmed the complex and often conflicting agendas from micro to macro level. Adventure and wanderlust do not necessarily provide lucrative career prospects and are further challenged by the risk of delayed transitions. Lance described two sides to his aspirations “to go off and explore” and “to sit in a boardroom and wear a suit and be a very important man [laughs]”. Other participants had goals to earn a good graduate salary, but it was evident that they did not want to relinquish their outdoor passions. Hannah had a vision: “I’d like to end up with a lot of money [laugh] ... something to do with the outdoors and I’d like to be living comfortable”. Hannah and Lance summed up the dichotomy that this cohort are faced with, when trying to balance graduate expectations of higher salaries, with their need to satisfy personal passions. As Bonnie proposed: “I’m hoping to you know, have enough money to live a life” further reaffirming the importance, this cohort placed on an effective balance between work and play, a message which was prominent throughout the study but in conflict with macro/meso agendas.

5.4 Summary

Chapter 5 has explored the participant HE journey and the impact of EE opportunities over their three years. Participant understanding of EE terminology was limited but engagement had a profound effect on personal and professional dispositions and associated learner trajectories and careership. Despite the positive benefits of EE this chapter exposed patterns of indecisiveness, fluctuating desires, escapism and a ‘wanderlust’ mentality and how this impacts post-graduation, and the revelation of a growing need to satisfy personal
and hedonistic aspirations ahead of professional careers. Chapter 6 now provides
discussion of these findings in relation to previous literature and to present nuances to
strengthen new and emerging theory.
Chapter 6 Discussion

To help answer my research question - *What are student perspectives on EE as part of their HE learner journey?* - this discussion explores my findings in relation to previous literature and theories as illustrated in the conceptual framework. This includes some conflicting and complex perspectives specific to the cohort, which may inform future theory and practice. My study followed the learner journey in a linear fashion, beginning with pre-HE and transition into HE life, through to student experiences of EE during the three years of the degree and the impact this had on career development as they prepared for graduation; concluding with student perspectives on their post-HE direction. However, theoretical concepts associated with this study are anything but linear and Figure 6.1 illustrates this complexity.

Figure 6.1 Multi-layered concepts and themes associated with the study

My study reaffirmed how theory associated with learning cultures, transitions, and the influence of EE experiences on a learner’s horizons for action are multi-layered. It exposed
complex inter-connecting macro/micro relationships across material and symbolic dimensions as underpinned by Bourdieu (1994) and associated theory. Key outcomes in relation to these concepts are discussed, in five sub sections: (1) learner identities/habitus and decision-making, (2) EE terminology and learner understanding, (3) student EE experiences (4) student engagement with the university’s Employability Services and (5) student horizons for action (post-graduation).

6.1 Learner identity and the impact and influence of habitus, structure and field theory on decision-making

Learner attitudes, status and behaviours of the cohort reflected theoretical concepts of learner identity described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) as a portfolio of dispositions. These focused on shared characteristics reflective of non-traditional learners and more specifically passions in recreational adventurous pursuits which guide vocational habitus and an attraction and engagement with work-based learning. These were influenced by factors which informed habitus and the learners’ social, economic and cultural capital, based on how learners think and feel about their world and their place within it both consciously and subconsciously. In my study, key factors previously identified by studies such as Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) and Brookes (2003) highlighted how learner identities revolved around academic status, perceived educational abilities (or inabilities) vocational preferences and life interests in the outdoors, adventure and a wanderlust mentality. The latter link to the work of Colley et al. (2003) and the power of vocational habitus which emerged early in pre-HE discussions. Through the data it showed how initially vocational habitus helped decision-making for university and course selection, which grew and strengthened as learners immersed themselves in EE activities and associated work-related experiences as part of their learner journeys.

Participants mostly reflected characteristics of non-traditional learners and those targeted at the macro government level to increase widening participation and inclusivity in HE; most were from working class families and were the first to go to university. Many had transitioned from BTEC and vocational subject areas to access HE as opposed to
traditional A Level routes. Participants were self-depreciating of their educational abilities and class background and demonstrated a conscious awareness of their low academic status, affirming shared habitus and the limitations of the structural institutions in which they were placed. This echoes previous research such as Brooks (2003), Gorard and Smith (2007) and Reay et al. (2010; 2018) regarding attitudinal barriers to HE for non-traditional learners exploring social inequalities in university access, as well as dispositional barriers where students from working classes often struggle in confidence to pursue HE. This resulted in participants demonstrating anxiety as to whether they would ‘fit in’ within an HE environment and which initially questioned their choice of HEI and course.

Stories were powerful where participants from BTEC groups were consciously aware of their perceived status as ‘troubled kids’ and initially conforming to type. However, many in the cohort defied this status when considering progression to HE demonstrating the complex and often conflicting patterns of student behaviours, attitudes and subsequent agency. This resonates with Archer’s findings (2010, 2014) and how young people often hold several aspirations at any one time which are not always complementary and influenced by a range of structures and associated habitus including family, schools, interests, careers and media. This further illustrates the complex layers of uncovering habitus as recognised by Costa et al. (2019). Some participants did recognise the positive impact that a school, college and/or associated teacher had on their decision-making, through support and motivation to aspire further in HE; to defy the alleged limitations of their academic competencies and to look beyond the horizons for action and the fields in which they were bound. This supports Barbara and Netherton’s (2018) perspective that teachers can play a pivotal role in aiding HE transitions and self-belief. This is important as many previous studies focused on the negativity of the power and influence of structure and field theory regarding non-traditional learners and the implications of dualism and the divide between elite, traditional universities and post-1992 (Macfarlane 2015).

Whilst my study confirms how habitus, structure and the fields in which the learner is connected can influence decision-making, it also indicates that the learners’ agency and capacity to make independent decisions is stronger than some research associated to Bourdieu’s original concepts, may suggest. Participants consciously fought against
structural influences such as the schools/colleges they were in or the family opinion, background and values associated with their individual lives. Structural defiance and independent agency were prevalent and even the minority who came from a grammar school background, still chose to push against the wishes of teachers/careers advisors and the institutional structure and field in which they were placed. This supports Giddens’ (1991) perspective on the impact of an individual’s reflexive actions which can have a transformative impact on their learner life course and demonstrates how it can provide a catalyst for exercising learner agency.

The grammar school approach in pushing participants to select Russell Group HEIs did support existing literature such as Shattock (2012) and Macfarlane (2015) and reflected Bourdieu’s perspective not only on the potential for structural influence on a learner’s agency, but also the complex relationships and external pressures at macro level. This magnifies the pressures on schools both tangibly, in terms of government policy (KPI’s/targets etc) as well as symbolically through the multi-layers associated with competition and reputation. However, whilst it was evident that participants considered these implications, they did not conform. Unlike other studies, participants demonstrated how vocational habitus informed independent decision-making and agency and overpowered educational (institutional) structural influences. This was demonstrates by their choice to fulfil personal interest in the adventure and outdoor industry and in pursuing a vocational HE degree that catered for this instead of a more traditional, reputable academic subject.

Of the minority of students that did study A levels and/or were from a middle class background, the findings conflicted with studies such as Brooks (2003), Gorard and Smith (2007) and Bathmaker et al. (2013). In previous studies middle class students generally had a smoother transition and focus on a HE pathway due partly to social class and educational structures in which they were placed. However, for participants in my study, academic background was irrelevant as aspirations and direction were just as unclear as those from working class backgrounds. The disparity of subjects participants studied pre-HE reflected this, selected on a relatively ad hoc basis with little systematic or logical progression for a future career. This was reflected in all participants whether they studied BTEC or A Levels and revealed how the distractions of their hobbies and passions for
adventurous pursuits and a desire to work in associated contemporary industries, resulted in a less clear and definable career path.

Shared disposition regarding career aspirations was prominent and most participants lacked career direction prior to HE but had a shared passion for vocational opportunities. All participants had powerful beliefs and values, based on adventurous outdoor pursuits and which, resonates with Colley et al. (2003) regarding the influence that vocational habitus can have of on decision-making. This brought participants together on the degree programme and had a far stronger influence on their learner trajectories post 6th form/college. Vocational habitus was evident by the revelations of a shared drive for personal travel and adventure. This was substantive in the findings alongside a preference for more practical, hands-on experiences, framed in the work-related context of the degree and strengthened through their socialisation which was evident through formal and informal learning experiences. Most participants did not know what to do next and saw the content of the degree as an attraction to satisfy vocational passions, whilst still contributing in some ways to societal need to progress either into work or HE. The findings demonstrated the importance of the adventure/outdoor related subject area of the course in attracting a certain type of student, linked to their cultural and social habitus and strengthened by shared interests and values. Recognition of this shared wanderlust and drive for adventure, was extremely powerful throughout the group.

In this study, I have shown that a dichotomy exists between the learning cultures of this cohort. Whilst participants shared relatively limited horizons and a general lack of confidence in academic self-actualisation and career direction, the study also observed opposing and conflicting views and behaviour at times. Structural influences and associated habitus of status, background and education were identified and synonymous with non-traditional learners and limiting a learner’s vision of ‘what lies beyond’ (Hodkinson 2008:4). However, in my study students were also often defiant in their decisions and actions; whilst having reservations they were adamant they were going to university despite recognition of their own perceived academic limitations. This paradoxical attitude is important as it demonstrates the multi-layered culture of today’s non-traditional students who battle confidence issues and question their academic worth
(and more), whilst wanting to break free from the mould set by society. Behaviour is further convoluted as fee paying consumers who can be forthright and demanding of HE, as demonstrated in this study. This was alluded to by Nixon et al. (2018) who identified characteristics of today’s ‘narcissistic student’. Whilst this was not overt in participants in this study, there was an undercurrent of expectation and particularly when suggesting how EE opportunities could be improved or attributing disengagement.

Despite nuances in learner demand, defiance and a stronger agency to progress into HE, findings did reaffirm previous literature such as Brooks (2003) and Gorard and Smith (2007) regarding the influence family, schools/colleges, friends and peer groups have on each learner journey and their broader life aspirations. Participants were consciously aware of the influence of educational structures, but personal backgrounds, family and friendship groups were more unconscious. Family was particularly dominant in all student stories and reaffirmed non-traditional routes as participants revealed they were first generation to go to university. Family influence was dominant yet varied and was dependent on parent/guardians’ own academic and educational experiences and knowledge of HE alongside generational and sibling influences. This ranged from support and guidance, through to scepticism and criticism of pursuing an HE pathway.

Whilst behaviours and attitudes of family/friends were generally reflective of field theory, the way in which participants responded was far more individualistic and again showed defiance where family members challenged or questioned decision-making. Participants exhibited characteristics reflective of non-traditional learners, lacking in confidence and with limited career aspirations but simultaneously demonstrated an inner belief and assertiveness that they can and should be able to achieve at HE and beyond, regardless of family, friends or other structural influences within their fields. This indicates an individualisation of opportunity as participants strive to take control of their lives, fuelled by self-reflectively organised identities which developed across the learner journey. This concurs with Briggs et al. (2012) who exposed complex learner transitions that exist when exploring learner identity, reaffirming learner individuality and the de-standardisation of the life course where pathways are neither linear nor predictable as suggested by Roberts.
Chapter 6

(2011). My participants attempted to assert an identity beyond the pre-defined cultural script associated with their background, status and class.

Decision-making regarding university of choice, reinforced the defiance of these participants and conflicts again with some previous literature such as Reay et al. (2010; 2018) regarding power and influence of certain fields and associated structures. Participants in my study were less influenced by status, reputation and national league tables as Shattock (2010) and Macfarlane (2014) might suggest. They showed no interest in how prestigious the HEI was and it had little bearing on their decision-making. Location and the course itself were two far more dominant factors for this group and reflected the vocational passions associated with the adventure and outdoor management degree. All participants regarded the content of the course a critical factor in course and HEI choice. The management content of the degree was prominent in decision-making and is somewhat surprising, when considering the vocational and practical preferences expressed. Despite demonstrating characteristics associated with vocational habitus (Colley et al. 2003), such as preferring active, ‘hands-on’ learning, my participants also had a pragmatic and rational approach, recognising the importance of management to enable career progression and development. Whilst recognising the practical/experiential learning aspects integral to the adventure field, as indicated by Prince (2005), Priest and Gass (2005), Kosseff (2010) and Gray et al., (2011), my participants were far more focused on the management potential, and less practical aspects that their degree provided. This again demonstrates a conflict in dispositions and associated career aspirations; these participants have shown a preference for vocational, practical experiences and are opposed to more traditional academic subjects yet still wanted more theoretical, albeit work related topics associated with management. This allowed opportunity to progress into more responsible positions, breaking boundaries set by the original horizons for action in which they were placed. This reflects more recent adventure and outdoor studies such as Mullins (2014), Stott (2015) and Hickman and Stokes (2016), who recognised the need for a broader balance of academic knowledge and the application and development of practical and professional experiences and associated skills.
6.2 EE understanding, terminology and in relation to stakeholder perspectives

The literature indicates pressures at macro level, regarding the importance of EE from both the government (DBIS 2016) and industry perspectives (Hickman and Stokes 2016). Studies from Pegg et al. (2012) and Heyley and Lee (2014) reinforce the importance of not only understanding what EE is, but recognising how it aids the development of an extensive range of employability skills transferrable into future careers for graduates as they near the end of their HE learner journey. Students are integral to this, but my study showed that participant understanding of EE terms was significantly lacking. Whilst participants discussed at length their experiences associated to EE activities, in many cases they failed to recognise the terminology in relation to their learning. Participants repeatedly demonstrated confused interpretation of EE and interchangeable terms such as real-world learning, professional experiences and employability skills. This highlights the ambiguity and problems which arise when they are marketed as part of the learner experience. Furthermore, some participants found it difficult to see direct relevance of EE to their learner journey. This lack of awareness at the micro level, has the potential to impact on their future decision-making regarding career and learner trajectories as explored by Hodkinson (2008) and more recently Stott et al. (2014) by limiting their scope and associated aspirations. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge these implications to inform future strategy and practice both at the macro (government) and meso level, where HEIs tend to use EE terminology excessively but with little realisation of the confused interpretation and understanding at the student level.

Participant discussion on EE terminology was superficial with little recognition of broader links to industry/university collaboration and benefits in contributing positively to society and the global economy, as expressed by numerous government policy through HM Treasury (2015) and DBIS (2016) and further supported by associated publications (Wilson 2012; Witty 2013; Williamson et al. 2013). This exposes the gulf which exists between student understanding of EE at the metaphorical coalface, the meso level of the HEIs in which they are placed (and associated marketing rhetoric they use), and the macro environment where government EE policy is produced in collaboration with industry. Participants were less interested in the bigger picture and the political and economic
agenda, yet demonstrated practically, how their engagement in work-related, experiential placements and other EE activities within HE, facilitated their employability and career development. This relates to Gedye and Bueamont’s (2018) study on student EE vocabulary, with participants considering the value of EE from more of an intrinsic perspective.

Wedgewood’s (2008) research and later the interpretation of EE in HE models produced by Bolden et al. (2009) provided some structure and parameters to defining EE. However, participant responses only focused on the practicalities and ‘hands on’ examples of EE reflected in the model by Bolden et al. (2009) under student placements and careers advice and support. All other elements regarding the political agenda and the multi-dimensional relationships that HE/EE collaborations offer at macros/meso level were unnoticed by participants. Understanding of the bigger picture from participants was nominal showing limited knowledge in defining EE and a lack of awareness of their position (and power) in the tripartite relationship between HEI, employer and employee. This reaffirms the complexities alluded to by Dhillon et al. 2011 and Basit et al. (2015) about the confusing and complex, multi-layers of different stakeholder agendas and strengthens Tomlinson’s (2014) argument; student assumptions and misconceptions surrounding HE must be addressed to ensure high attainment and to meet stakeholder demands at all levels. This also links also to Huddleston and Lazcik (2018) and Bolli et al. (2017) wider issues about EE collaborations needing to be carefully matched (between all parties), to ensure success. These findings need to inform the meso level and the School where participants and the course are placed, as well as at strategy level where clarity is needed to avoid superficial and ambiguous claims. Specifically, practitioners like myself must mediate between macro level policy and the student’s lived experiences and development at the micro level. Understanding about EE and its significance to the bigger picture must be embedded more thoroughly in the programme. Failure to do so, risks EE terms being meaningless if students are unaware of their significance not only to their own learner journeys but the wider fields that they inhabit now and in the future.
6.3 EE experiences, impact on the learner journey, transitions and trajectories

Exploring student perception and experiences of EE throughout their HE journeys bridges the gap in my study between each participant’s original pre-HE status and post HE career aspirations. Participant dispositions, transition theory and learner trajectories were observed in practice and each participant’s story provided examples of how EE experiences have shaped their future direction and subsequent horizons for action as they leave undergraduate study. Participant reflections regarding academic, personal and social development, were repeatedly identified, with many positive responses relating to transition theory, particularly Gale and Parker’s (2014) first two concepts of induction and development, across the three years. It was evident that EE experiences helped advance personal, professional, and combined employability skills, which influenced learner trajectory in preparation for future progression, post-graduation. Participant stories demonstrated how an initial lack of career direction could be transformed through EE activity, such as industry networking early in ‘induction’ phase of the course, leading to work placements (development). For a minority the ‘becoming’ element was fulfilled where a paid role was offered at the end of the placement. This differs with Gale and Parker’s (2014) perspective that becoming is a less tangible proposition and reinforces how EE experiences can contribute to the growth and development of students to help navigate into future employment and demonstrating careership theory in action (Hodkinson et al. 2008).

My study shows that transitions were an evolving, individualised process, influenced initially from previous educational backgrounds, socio-economic status and home life. Despite differences, participants demonstrated how EE opportunities in HE could aid learning and careership theory (Hodkinson et al., 2008). Participant transitions varied, from securing a job after the placement through to increased involvement and responsibility in related university societies, such as President and committee roles. This shows how the learner journey and associated transitions were influenced both by academic elements associated to the degree and extra-curricular opportunities and access to practical experiences outside of the university. This supports the outcomes of Stott et al. (2014) whose research of undergraduate adventure students concluded the importance of
providing a balance of academic and professional experiences and the importance of maintaining connections with their community of practice, further resonating with Stanley and Mann’s (2014) family of concepts associated with human and social capital in a vocational context. This also demonstrates how Bourdieu’s concepts, which are often contradictory, can be applied to my participants when considering the impact of EE within their HE learner journeys. It is evident through the data that their habitus was developed and built through the different fields they were positioned in before and during their learner journeys and that this could change over time. Pre-HE participants were challenged in different contexts (family, class, education) and they battled between conforming and choosing their own path. However, as they progressed through their HE learner journey, guided by vocational habitus, their agency strengthened as they were exposed to more EE opportunities and across different industry fields which helped inform their career decision-making.

Participant discussion of EE was extensive and showed the substantive impact activities such as work placements, guest talks and industry visits had, not only on personal development, experience and knowledge, but on ongoing career offers that came as a result. This illustrates Colley et al.’s (2003) concepts of learner identities and transforming cultures through EE and strengthening vocational habitus. Several participants shared stories where they accepted the chance to return for further work experience voluntarily or secured permanent positions, demonstrating how networking helped with learner trajectories and careership. Furthermore, it strengthens the potential for positive EE gains, enabling learners to develop a combination of human, social and cultural capital through their work-based learning, as previously presented by Jones et al. (2015). Through these success stories participants began to see their economic worth and what they could offer the industry fields that they entered. Whilst full time jobs were not necessarily secured from EE experiences, many described how work placements had opened doors for later in life. This demonstrated the potential for EE to offer a pathway, from initial networking, into repeat job opportunities, as reflected in Gale and Parker’s (2014) induction and development stages, with the final becoming stage, a possibility through a permanent position post-graduation.
Transitions were complex, as Kendall et al. (2018) previously noted, and for this cohort were individualistic, dependent on interests and motivations, as to how or if they chose to engage with EE opportunities. This supports previous literature Cote and Bymer (2008); Goodwin and O’Connor (2009); Roberts (2011) regarding the de-standardisation of the life course and the non-linear pathways that today’s students, such as this cohort follow, influenced both by the structures that surround them and individual agency. This supports Edgerton and Roberts’ (2014) view on habitus and how dispositions affect behaviour. Bowles et al.'s (2014) transition study can be applied to this cohort as findings show that the university’s course organisation, strong management underpinning, and EE programming, provided support and stability, whilst building confidence in student motivation, effort and commitment. In my study each participant’s story demonstrates that EE experiences, integrated through the degree, has the power to support (as opposed to inhibit) learner transitions within their HE journey. The cohort was unanimous in sharing positive experiences on the influence and impact that EE opportunities had on all aspects of their university life.

The outdoor centre residential trip in the first six weeks of the degree, provided one substantial example of the impact that an EE experience had on participants. Stories associated with this week of outdoor activities, career talks, and team building, were shared extensively by every participant. All shared the positive personal, social and developmental opportunities that it provided, strengthening people individually, the cohort as a family, as well as providing a professional experience and outlook on future careers. This perspective reinforces again the concepts of vocational habitus (Colley et al. 2003) and the values shared across the group for experiential learning. The power of this trip on every individual was unparalleled in the findings and indicates that further research into the impact of residential early in an undergraduate’s journey would be beneficial for exploring long term transitions.

Personal confidence, resilience and self-esteem grew in participants across the degree, and whilst it is not possible to make claims that EE activities were solely responsible for this development, experiences like work placements, industry networking and experiential learning opportunities contributed substantially. This is clear from a range of participant
experiences such as the growth in confidence and ability to lead people following a work placement with a leadership role, through to participants acknowledging real-world assignments and how a ‘dragons den’ style business pitch allowed communication and public speaking skills to be practiced and enhanced. For some, this led to new transition such as becoming a Student Ambassador or Peer Mentor. The findings provided extensive evidence of the positive impact of such experiences and relate to Brooman and Darwent’s (2014) study of transition enablers in building self-efficacy, autonomous learning and social integration. They recommended the importance of an integrated system of transitions as opposed to a scattergun approach. My study indicates that the structured programme of EE opportunities interwoven through the degree programme, support Brooman and Darwent’s (2014) recommendations. The whole cohort commented positively on the programme of guest speakers, trips and mandatory work placement requirements, and how they were used as part of learning and assessment and were not just about playing and having fun. This demonstrated how participants were consciously aware of the importance in EE activities as part of their learner journey.

Through my study transitions continued to be protracted. Participants showed differences in interest and motivation for certain EE experiences and there were several reasons for this including powerful factors outside of university, from social distractions through to work, finance and home life pressures. Participant life in and outside of the university are often closely interlinked and structures external to HE can inhibit or strengthen an individual. This is reflected in numerous participant accounts and whilst not the focus of the study, demonstrates complex connections. Previous literature is limited on how the practicalities of life outside of university can impact learner transitions and trajectories, yet it had an underlying influence throughout these participants HE journeys. A substantial element in this study was the individual passions of the cohort and their differing expectations and career aspirations which also influenced engagement or disengagement. If participants could not see the relevance to a talk or trip and it did not spark their interest, then individuals disengaged. This exposes two key points, firstly, that agency within this cohort can defy structural influences as recognised initially in pre-HE decision-making and which continued through their learner journey to graduation. Secondly, the diversity of the adventure and outdoor industry can be a double edged sword, by inspiring and motivating students but at times, providing too much choice.
Demands and needs of participants were substantive and growing, and this highlights the difficulty HEIs have in meeting a wide range of student expectations, and which subsequently can impact on overall satisfaction of their experience. This again reflected Nixon et al. (2018) and their concerns at the strain of marketised consumer attitudes due to students as fee paying customers. My study concurred with this societal shift in HE and growing demands from participants and as recognised by previous research such as Woodall et al. (2014) and Tomlinson (2017). Participants often provided unjustified and conflicting statements relating to EE activities, the course and future curriculum development. This included unrealistic and random suggestions such as more extreme adventurous trips and networking with huge global corporations, but it was unclear how or why they would enhance learning and satisfaction. Also, some suggestions were made by participants who had not engaged in many of the EE opportunities already offered. This revealed an interesting paradox where the participants acknowledged the positive benefits of EE activities and the logistical difficulties to ensure it provides value for money and quality learning outcomes, yet for some, they still wanted more. Here, the positive impact of EE in relation to careership, transitions and building employability is less clear. Whilst participants were confident to propose enhancements to their EE learning experience there was no justification as to how it would strengthen their employability or expand their horizons for action.

The course subject provides a diverse range of career opportunities in a dynamic, continually growing and expanding industry (Ogilvie 2013; Sport England and the Outdoor Industry Association 2015; Skills Active 2016). However, conversely, it can also disengage participants if a speaker, topic or industry visit is not of interest to the individual. This demonstrates how despite shared vocational habitus (Colley et al. 2003) and interests in the adventure and outdoor fields, individually participants show differences. This is what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) described as a portfolio of dispositions informed from diverse backgrounds and associated fields and subsequently, influencing the values they place on different EE opportunities offered.
Due to the specialist vocational nature of the cohort for this study, practical EE activities dominated discussion about the importance of experiential learning. However, whilst this aligned with outcomes of previous research, such as Prince (2005), Priest and Gass (2005), Humberstone and Brown (2008), Kosseff (2010), Stott et al., (2014) and Attarian (2015), the findings also exposed nuances. Unlike some of these studies, my findings clarified that practical participation, coaching and the attainment of NGB qualifications were not as important in the degree. Instead, participants recognised how the mandatory work placement, employer networking and extra-curricular activities, offered practical experiences and application of theory to practice whilst enhancing professional and vocational skills. This reinforced participant commitment to the management element of this course, as opposed to the more practical programmes offered by other universities. Findings did echo some studies, like Hickman and Collins (2014), Mullins (2014) and Hickman and Stokes (2016) which suggested that the breadth of real-world skills needed to go beyond instruction to focus on transferable skills in personal and social development and which advocated a growing need for graduates to know their industry and work environment.

6.4 Challenges for an HEI delivering EE and related support mechanisms

The HEI in which the study was conducted prides itself on being a ‘real-world’ learning institute, based on maximising student employability. As part of this study, participants were asked to comment on their experiences of two key support mechanisms provided in the HEI to help understand how these university wide services were engaged with as part of the learner journey and alongside the course specific EE opportunities provided. Knowledge, experience and engagement of the Employability Service was mixed, sporadic and confused. Numerous extracts from participant discussions alluded to a vague or superficial awareness in most cases with very few having a clear understanding of the range of services provided or where they could access this. Furthermore, where participants had heard about it, communications through emails and the university online portal were not effective in informing or engaging the learner. Participants were not
maximising opportunities to develop their employability skills which could inhibit or limit further trajectories despite the services being available by the HEI.

This demonstrates the challenges faced at meso level by the HEIs who set strategies to respond to macro pressures for EE, as Lumby’s (2015) research on leadership, highlighted, yet must balance this with responding to the complexities of behaviour, attitudes, and individuality of learner identities and developing dispositions at the micro level. This supports Turner and Tobell’s (2018) suggestion of needing to ensure that systems and practices acknowledge differences and support changing identities. As Petrov et al., (2016) proposed, there needs to be a connected fit between leadership within HEIs to facilitate meaningful collaboration with industry and the outcomes it provides, but not just to satisfy macro agenda’s but to ensure engagement by students to aid their careership, employability and horizons for action. With UK government and associated stakeholders continuing to advocate the importance of EE in raising productivity and economic growth, and most recently through the Augar Report (DBIS 2019) and the need to create a highly skilled workforce, HEI’s continue to come under scrutiny. However, participants’ general apathy and lack of engagement with the university Employment Services indicate that there is a gap between meso and micro level.

Providing effective EE support to aid graduates and subsequently the employee/employer relationship is essential. However, whilst the Employability Service were providing the appropriate services (acknowledged by a minority of the cohort that utilised them), mostly they were not reaching the participants themselves. A reoccurring message was that the services were not promoted effectively. However, when exploring this in more detail it became apparent that participants received emails but in many cases chose not to read them either due to lack of interest or because they did not feel that they needed to know about it. Again, this reinforces previous discussion on today’s students who appear to have (at times) this self-confidence and defiance, fuelling their agency to conclude that they do not require the support, or do not feel it is relevant to them. This was a disturbing pattern as perspectives balanced between defiance and apathy (by their own admission) resulting in participants not utilising EE support. Participant responses to the employability questionnaire confirmed the lack of interest in support mechanisms to aid future
employability and career progression. Whilst all participants had completed it most had forgotten it or at best had a vague recollection and few had reviewed their results or compared progression. There was a resounding response in the criticism of the system as a metric-based measure. This reinforces that there is a gap between meso level, strategic EE provision, and delivery and take up at the micro level.

6.5 Implications and issues in measuring employability within an HEI

There are considerable pressures faced by HEIs regarding KPIs, on measuring employability and associated outputs, as recognised by Tomlinson (2014), Moore et al., (2013) and Bowes et al. (2015). Responses from participants on the HEIs Employability Service and employability questionnaire are important in highlighting the disparity and distance between macro demands and actual engagement and understanding by learners (of their capital worth) at the micro level. Whilst government continue to press for measurable outcomes from HEIs associated to DLHE, NSS and more recently TEF, there is an increasing pressure on HEI’s and this has influenced a metric based approach.

Participants provided an insightful perspective on measuring student opinion regarding employability questionnaires and NSS, with shared opinion that attempting to measure student feelings and satisfaction was futile as it largely depended mood on the day of completion. This is a crucial message that needs to be voiced at meso and macro level if NSS and associated TEF targets are to be achieved and/or exceeded. Ultimately these results rely on the effective engagement, motivation and performance of students. Therefore, if at the metaphoric coalface they are dissatisfied with the way in which they are consulted and how their opinions and performances are reviewed, then there is a risk that the HEI’s will be unable to meet the increasing and challenging targets set at macro level. With Pegg et al. (2012) and Heyley and Lee (2014) highlighting the importance of developing employability skills through the undergraduate learner journey, reinforced with the macro demands for DLHE data, it is imperative that the messages from those integral to the process are listened to. My findings can inform recommendations at meso level for the HEI and my own professional practice, in illuminating more clearly why and how
students’ engagement contributes not only to their future career aspirations and employability, but again the bigger picture as part of socio-economic capital to help achieve government objectives for society.

6.6 Horizons for action post-graduation

This study has demonstrated a strong link between pre-HE status, attitudes and backgrounds, the three year HE learner journey itself (and subsequent EE experiences), and ultimately how it informs and impacts on future direction. Careership theory and horizons for action (Hodkinson 2008) were integral in how learner career aspirations may have changed since their initial ideas pre-HE and whether their learner journey and associated EE opportunities have impacted on this. Giddens’ (1991) reflexive approach was applied during interviews and encouraged participants to consider whether reflexive actions, identities and intentions had a transformative impact on their life-course, and in what ways. Each participant discussed how the three year HE experience had impacted both academically and in wider life skills. These shared narratives add weight to the outcomes of studies such as that of Heyler and Lee (2014). Their study recognised the differing perspectives of employability skills and are echoed by participants during my study who described a range of benefits from engaging in EE opportunities, developing transferable skills in teamwork and communication, as well as self-confidence and resilience. A key point evident from the findings related to the combination of academic and vocational learning opportunities provided through the course. This was evident where participant career outlooks had significantly changed and broadened through exposure to a range of outdoor and adventure industries and EE activities. The combination of academic underpinning and application to real life scenarios was substantive and these reflections shared by the cohort supported previous literature regarding vocational degrees (Colley et al. 2003), experiential learning and similar approaches recognised by studies such as Mullins (2014) Stott (2015) and Hickman and Stokes (2015).

When referring to the influence on careership and Hodgkinson’s (2008) horizons for action, exposure to wider career opportunities beyond the participants original vision, is
one of the most important outcomes. Previous criticisms about the value of vocationally focused courses, and what Katartzi and Hayward (2019) described as a misrecognition of worth, have been vanquished in many ways. The findings have shown how participants in the cohort have defied their recognised status and pre-scripted learner identity, from pre-HE, rising above and beyond the ‘naughty kid’ label and having the confidence to look beyond. Reflective of vocational habitus (Colley et al. 2003), these participants have shared experiences and reflections through the investigation which demonstrate how they have been able to overcome the potential attitudinal and dispositional barriers to their habitus, status and the field and structures which they were originally placed. The findings indicate that a combination of factors including the attraction of the HEI and specifically the course and content gave many students the motivation to pursue HE. Through their individual and shared learner journey’s it is evident that the EE opportunities they have been exposed to alongside university and associated home and family life, has helped to build personal resilience and professional confidence to seek opportunities beyond their horizons.

Despite a shared confidence in future careers as they graduate, conversely the findings also showed that many of the cohort still lacked a clear career direction and possibly further ‘transition friction’ (Katartzi and Hayward 2019). Whilst participants shared feelings of increased self-confidence, knowledge and professional skills and experiences to secure future roles, there was still an undertone of indecisiveness. This reaffirms Archer’s (2010) recognition that learning cultures and identities, have the power to inform and fuel learner aspirations, but these are often complicated, contradictory. The ‘diving board’ analogy used by Beaumont et al. (2016) is pertinent here, as my study, like theirs, showed a conflict between employability and confidence in securing a career. However, barriers to career progression post-graduation were less obvious in my participants and instead, the pursuit of recreational desires were more the distraction.

The cohort’s shared vocational characteristics and passions for adventure, escapism and wanderlust was substantial as they reflected on their future direction post-graduation. Participants shared a fear of conformity to an institutionalised industry culture and instead spoke of travel and exploration as opposed to focusing on securing a solid career. The
findings have exposed a complex dichotomy whereby participants reflect positively on their learner journey, the confidence it has given them, and recognition of the much broader career opportunities available to them, yet many are not ready to progress into a career; instead their transitions post-graduation could be delayed due to personal aspirations. This may impact on performance and achievement of KPIs post-graduation and where the pressures of DLHE data is at risk of corruption with this type of cohort who aspire to travel and explore, post-graduation, as opposed to conform to the linear life-course. Here Gale and Parker’s (2014) third stage of ‘becoming’ appears unachievable in the short to mid-term, for some of these participants, as their narrative suggests that they will be choosing to satisfy their personal wanderlust over career security.

Participants in this study reaffirm the protracted life-course and indicate that their changing passions and career aspirations may result in decisions to decline some career opportunities. This reinforces my predictions (Melhuish 2016) of a potential power shift between the employer-graduate relationship and where graduate agency may result in a shortfall in recruitment to meet the demands of an industry that continues to grow and diversify. This is arguably advantageous to graduates should industry demand exceed supply. However, it further reaffirms the complexities of multi-layered relationships at macro, meso and micro level, and where success in terms of a stable, buoyant and growing economy, require a careful balance and sensitive recognition of differing needs and pressures, between government agendas, formal educational and industry structures and the students and associated lives and backgrounds in which they are placed.

6.7 Summary and reflection of the research process

My study was only ever focusing on one cohort in detail and catching a moment in time; facilitating the participants in reflecting across their three year journey. This approach enabled me to delve deeply into the lives of my participants and to obtain enriched narrative about their pre-HE lives, the impact and influence of EE activities experienced during their HE journey and how it prepared them for future careers. It could be argued that only focusing on one cohort is a weakness to the study. However, this allowed in depth
emersion in extended participant lives, providing a unique picture. Recognising the parameters of this interpretive, inductive approach through transparency and to ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings and discussion, arguably counteracted any single cohort weakness.

Exploring participants from my course and within my own HEI, I was able to benefit from accessing and managing the research process effectively as an insider. My established relationship and rapport with participants helped me to facilitate meaningful discussion during focus groups and interviews. However, this positionality also meant that analysis and interpretation of the findings was challenging and it was difficult to step back and regards the material free of assumptions based on my personal knowledge and my own values and axiology. By being transparent in the process I have been able to manage this to maximise the effectiveness of my research process.

I have teased out reoccurring topics, and emerging patterns to establish key themes and sub-themes which have professional implications and can be used to inform my own practice and within my HEI, as well having the potential to share outcomes with macro-stakeholders through research publications and engagement in HE and industry networks and conferences. Key outcomes focused on reaffirming some conceptual aspects relating to learner identity (non-traditional) and the influence of Bourdieusian principles in learner transitions, trajectories and career aspirations. Furthermore, it provided empirical evidence to strengthen the powerful benefits of EE and work related, experiential learning theory. However, it also highlighted nuances specific to the vocational habitus of this cohort as well as exposing a dichotomy of conformity vs defiance regarding learner agency. Use and understanding of EE terminology and student engagement with HEI Employment Services were also substantial and will inform my own practice and that of the wider HEI.

One of the biggest difficulties I faced was avoiding digression from the original research question. I realised through the literature and as I undertook the research process and analysis of findings, that concepts relating to widening participation, inclusivity and the impact of Bourdieu’s concepts on the wider learner and life journey were substantial. I
found it fascinating to explore the individual and habitual nature of this cohort relating to their characteristics as non-traditional, vocationally inspired learners and particularly the influence of life outside of university. However, parts of this departed from the original research question. Whilst these connecting, multi-layered themes were important to highlight, in terms of their subtle undercurrent within the participant’s HE learner journey, I had to be ruthless with content and re-direct the focus more on EE and to omit material which did not contribute effectively to the research question. This was particularly challenging for me not only in having to cut large swathes of material but also in refraining from taking the study too far in a different direction, despite my academic curiosity and enthusiasm. I was particularly interested in some of the individual learner stories which could easily have become case studies in their own right. However, fundamentally changing my methodology and overall research design, would not have been practical for this EdD research and it could have jeopardised the whole study. I did refine the research aim, objectives and associated design, to ensure that the data I had captured could positively enhance the study but I was mindful not to deviate too far. The extended material from my study does provide opportunity for future research though, on related themes about the wider learner journey, as well as potential to explore specific learner case studies, and this has informed recommendations from this study.

A weakness of the study was that it only focused on the student perspective. During the design stage I had proposed a triangulated approach by researching from the industry (employer) and HEI (staff) perspective as well as the students, on EE. However, it quickly became apparent that this would be too big for this EdD and could also dilute the importance of the student perspective, which was my primary concern. I do feel a triangulated approach could be pursued as extended and complimentary research in the future, to compare the different stakeholder (tripartite) perspectives on EE collaborations, and again this is addressed in the recommendations.
Chapter 7  Conclusions and Recommendations

Participants in this cohort demonstrated some theoretical perspectives presented in the conceptual framework and there was some commonality with related widening participation studies. However, the focus on one cohort studying the contemporary subject of adventure and outdoor industries within a vocational degree in a post-1992 HEI, also provided distinctiveness and exposed nuances.

7.1  Decision-making and the power of vocational habitus

Influences pre-HE (and ongoing) by family, school/colleges, friends and peers confirmed the power of Bourdieu’s (1994) field theory and the complex interactions between a learner’s own habitus and structures to inform agency and subsequently their trajectory into HE and beyond. However, I found that the uniqueness of the cohort and their vocational habitus (Colley et al. 2003) influenced a much stronger individualised agency. I found that where a participant felt pushed or forced to pursue a specific path, it had the opposite effect and revealed a defiance and resilience to stand up against structural powers that exist, fuelled by higher macro forces. There was no evidence that this cohort were influenced by attitudinal or dispositional barriers to access HE at Russell Group universities as other publications alluded (Shattock 2012, Macfarlane 2015; Reay 2018). Instead shared vocational habitus, formed prior to entering HE (through previous educational and recreational experiences), had influenced participants to pursue the degree and demonstrated how this guided their institutional fit. Course content which balanced vocational experiences within a management context, was the main attraction in decision-making. Perhaps most surprising in relation to previous research was that students were conscious of their perceived learner identities as well as the power and influence of personal and educational structures in which they were placed. This resulted in being more informed in the decisions they made.
7.2 Dichotomy of the learner identity: ‘self-deprecating’ (conformity) vs ‘defiance’ pendulum

Nuances were magnified when behaviours and learning cultures of the cohort were explored. Despite participants in this cohort sharing characteristics synonymous with non-traditional learners, they also exuded conflicting behaviours. Students’ self-deprecation and lack of academic confidence and competence was apparent. However, contrastingly, they demonstrated an opposing defiance and an overt decision to go against the advice of some family, friends, careers advisors/teachers and/or media influence. I found this a quite extraordinary contradiction to many other studies in the last decade regarding the limitations of non-traditional learners. In this investigation the students were very much aware of their educational status, but the power and passion of their vocational habitus appeared to overcome the barriers and challenges they faced in their careership. This dichotomy of the learner identity from being self-deprecating and thus conforming to expectation, verses a defiance to overcome and exceed beyond their horizons for actions (Hodkinson et al. 1994), was prevalent throughout the study. This indicates that despite residual habitus as non-traditional learners, participant identity (and subsequent academic and person confidence) was developed by finding a vocational niche shared by the cohort.

7.3 EE as part of the HE learner journey and future career aspirations

I found a close connection between vocational habitus and EE activities and the strength of this was demonstrated as learners reflected on their HE journey. Whilst conflicting student behaviours and attitudes continued to swing, it was apparent that EE experiences had a substantive impact personally, socially, academically and professionally. Outcomes were not new or surprising and reinforced literature regarding work related, applied, and experiential HE learning and how it develops employability skills; thus, boosting learner trajectories. Whilst there was little novelty in this topic area, the findings magnified the importance of EE within an HE undergraduate programme, which is essential to aid and inform my own professional practice. Also, each participant’s story substantiated how EE activities facilitated HE transitions to strengthen employability and careership as part of the learner journey. A prominent outcome from the findings and more specific to the adventure and outdoor related fields, revealed how industry networking expanded learner
perspectives on what career opportunities are open to them, broadening further their horizons and dispelling the view that these non-traditional learners were limited in future careers.

Participants who embraced EE activities supported positively the benefits gained, but those that failed to, were disinterested or used external factors as excuses or distractions. Whilst beyond the scope of the study, it showed that factors outside of university life could impact on a learner journey and was important to raise for future research. Disengagement with the HEI’s Employability Service was a prominent feature and despite offering extensive support and guidance for career progression, it was not accessed enough. This raises the question as to whether students need to take more independent responsibility for seeking out these opportunities or whether the HEI’s should be more controlling. This links to the contrasting behaviours of these students who continually swing between self-deprecation (needing support and conforming) and defiance (showing independence and resilience). This also reaffirms the complexities of changing student cultures universally and their increasing expectations and demands as students shift to a consumer role as Nixon et al. (2018) and Tomlinson (2014) describe.

7.4 The trouble with ‘wanderlust’ (the passion to travel)

Another nuance I identified related to the detrimental impact of each participant’s shared passions and vocational habitus in the adventure field. The wanderlust motivations expressed by many of the cohort post-graduation, raised concerns and risks delayed transitions. The outcome expected at the macro level is for graduates to progress into work and contribute to the economic needs of society. However, many who still had a lack of career direction three years on, were unlikely to enter full time graduate employment in the first year (or longer) and, as the desire to travel and fulfil personal needs was far stronger. There was some evidence to suggest that underneath the growth in confidence, career aspirations and potential, characteristics of non-traditional learners were still influential. Despite students stating how they felt more empowered, knowledgeable and, skilled through their academic, life and experiential experiences, the lack of clarity on which
direction to pursue post-graduation, showed a continued undercurrent of self-doubt demonstrating the complexity of the learner journey and protracted transitions. These participants faced a continual pendulum battle between conforming to fit the mould or, exceeding expectations.

7.5 Implications at macro, meso and micro level

The findings reflect both tangible and symbolic structural influences indicating that these participants have the potential to respond to the demands of the macro environment where government advocates the importance of young people as future capital in contributing to the societal and economic well-being of the country. However, the conflicting behaviours of these participants raise concerns for the tripartite relationship in the future. Whilst it is shown that EE activities through an undergraduate degree can enhance employability and careership, the individuality of learners and the nuanced behaviours of this cohort, influenced by their vocational habitus and shared passions, threaten the potential to meet the needs of their specific industry post-graduation. The adventure and outdoor industry is growing, therefore, a cohort set on fulfilling, some may argue indulging, in wanderlust travel is not achieving the expectations set by government and industry. This not only threatens the measurable outcomes required by government and the responsibility of HEIs in achieving successful DLHE and related KPI data but leaves the industry in a position where demand for recruits may exceed supply as I had previously predicted.

7.6 Informing professional practice within my HEI and measuring employability

Positive outcomes of EE on the learner journey strengthen my HEI’s strategy which prides itself on supporting non-traditional learners and from diverse backgrounds. However, it is important to recall that participants found EE terms ambiguous and failed to see the connections between their engagement and future potential as part of the bigger picture. It is essential for future curriculum development to embed EE more clearly and prescriptively so that learners are fully engaged in their role as an undergraduate at the micro level to see
how they contribute to the meso/macro picture. Participants’ dislike of quantitative employability measures was a substantive outcome and participants were unanimous in their criticism of this process. Participants preferred qualitative reflection and this must be considered by my HEI to gain more meaningful responses. This highlights a universal problem at the meso level where universities are under pressure to fulfil a plethora of KPIs set by government and related agencies, and which impact on image, reputation, league placing and funding. Whereas, at the micro level the students who are allegedly the most important part of the whole process, prefer an alternative approach.

Participants indicated that metrics were not a good way to measure their views as data depended on mood. Whilst these outcomes from such a small and focused study, are unlikely to have an impact at macro level, the findings do contribute to related studies and provide a catalyst for future research to explore the nuances in this study. These findings can inform my HEI and nationally in reviewing internal processes for student self-reflection and evaluation of employability and subsequently related evaluations associated with broader student satisfaction.

### 7.7 Summary

From the findings I can conclude that pressures at the macro level are powerful and substantive and feed down to the meso/mico levels. Whilst the findings support the very positive benefits of EE activities within a vocational degree and for non-traditional learners specifically, the study highlights the complexities of the tripartite relationship, the pressures faced by industry/HEIs and the often forgotten perspective of those that are crucial to the whole collaboration - the student themselves. As I have shown through the findings, however, there is a complex balance required. Recognising and responding to student needs and meeting their expectations is essential. Students may share characteristics as this cohort has demonstrated, drawn together in vocational habitus, but students are also individual, with values, dispositions and behaviours, which are often changeable, influenced by complex and multi-layered structures and fields in which they are positioned. Furthermore, student demands and expectations, whether individual or
shared, are often in conflict with the agendas and objectives set at the meso HEI level and the increasing demands at macro level from government and industry.

7.8 Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed, informed by the key outcomes of this study as summarised in the conclusion. These are split into proposals for future research and those to inform future practice on EE within HE.

Further research:
First, it would be worthwhile replicating the study, within the HEI and nationally, with other similar vocational subjects and non-traditional cohorts to compare outcomes and explore whether there are shared patterns or increased nuances in relation to pre and post-HE decision-making, EE terminology (knowledge and understanding) impact of EE experiences on learner trajectories; careership and horizons for action. Second, knowledge would be enriched by qualitatively researching the other two tripartite (industry and HEI staff) perspectives on EE collaborations, vocational learning and employability for graduates, to compare with student perspectives. Third, it would be valuable to conduct a follow up qualitative study on the same cohort one to three years on to review their ongoing careership and horizons for action. Fourth, it would be beneficial to utilise the omitted material that digressed from the original study, for future research, particularly in relation to the wider lives of students and the factors outside of HE that can impact. Finally a fifth area for future study could focus on further analysis and exploration of selected individual learner stories from the material collated.

Practice:
I recommend that my HEI, through practitioner workshops and conference presentations review EE terminology: use of real-world learning, employability skills, vocational learning, and how this is communicated and understood by students in order to inform and imbed EE more prescriptively into the curriculum. I also recommend reviewing the
Employability Services’ promotion and marketing with students to improve learner knowledge, understanding and engagement and use of the self-evaluation employability test. I would also recommend piloting an alternative qualitative process for self-evaluation of employability skills.

For my School, I will disseminate good practice of EE activities to other degrees where vocational, experiential learning and practice could enhance the learner journey, student satisfaction and careership through practitioner workshops and conference presentations. For HEIs nationally, I will disseminate key outcomes on EE terminology and practice within HE to enhance the learner journey, student satisfaction and careership through conferences and publications. For adventure and outdoor industries, I will present subject related findings through publications and conferences on two key areas, firstly student perspectives on work placements and other industry networking opportunities (so industry are aware of student understanding, needs and expectations) to improve future collaborations. Secondly the benefits of engaging with HEIs for EE, future recruitment (and the need to provide opportunities to graduates beyond practical NGBs to avoid lack of applicants and to avoid a glass ceiling for career progression), to broaden horizons for action, careership and longevity in post-graduation careers.

In these ways the outcomes reported through my study can be used to strengthen and challenge existing and future research in the field of EE and associated theoretical concepts of the learner journey. It can also provide substantial evidence to inform practice within my own HEI, across the wider HE environment and specifically to industry who are integral to successful EE collaboration.
List of References


Boliver, V. (2013), How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities? The British Journal of Sociology, 64, 344-364.


Gibbs, G., (2017) Evidence does not support the rationale of the TEF. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 10(2).


Smith, H. (2007) Playing a different game: The contextual decision-making processes of minority ethnic students in choosing a higher education institution, Race, Ethnicity and Education 10(4), 415-437.


Appendix A  HEIs “Real-world” Curriculum Framework
Appendix B

Focus Group Schedule

Doctorate in Education

Study Title:
Exploring student perspectives on ‘employer engagement’ in higher education and concepts associated with the learner journey/life-course”

Researcher: Lynsey Melhuish
Ethics number: ID 26543

Focus-group Schedule

As the study is an inductive / interpretive approach, formal, structured, prescriptive questions will not be used for the focus group and instead only ‘themes/topics’ and ‘prompts’ will be introduced to encourage open/flow in group discussion/conversation and to minimise researcher influence/positionality and pre-conceived perspectives. It is envisaged that initial focus groups will be analysed to help formulate themes for the 1-1 interviews. Initial themes and prompts will be focused around the following elements (research questions) using visual aids/ flip chat / notelets and recorded discussion:

• OPENING QUESTION

“Why or how did you get here [HEI]... in other words ‘motives and incentives for coming to HEI’...and why this particular programme/course?” (reinforced on screen)

THEME/TOPIC:
Discuss the motives /incentives you had for selecting HEI and the BA Hons Adventure and Outdoor Management degree

PROMPTS:
- Influence of schools / colleges / career tutors / family / friends / employers in decision-making
- Other influences
- Attractions to HEI and the course
- Reservations (how were they overcome?)

• INTRODUCTION QUESTION -THROUGH TO TRANSITION QUESTION

“I want you to define [EE] – and what does it mean to you, what is employer engagement / real world / vocational learning?” (reinforced on screen)

THEME/TOPIC:
Define employer engagement and associated terms – what does it mean to you?

PROMPTS:
- Using discussion and ideas blasts (with flip chart paper) – define: employer engagement / real world learning / professional experience / employability skills
- Share ideas/ discuss as a group – similarities / differences / priorities

• KEY QUESTION (1)
“What are your thoughts, feelings, experiences of activities through your learner journey?”  
(reinforced on screen)

THEME/TOPIC:  
Thoughts, feelings, reflections on EE opportunities offered over the course of the ‘learner journey’

PROMPTS / FOLLOW UPS:  
  o Identify employer engagement activities undertaken in the first year, second year, final year  
  o Experiences gained / skills, knowledge, advancement/improvement?

• KEY QUESTION (2)

“How important to you think [EE] is for the degree”?  
(reinforced on screen)

THEME /TOPIC:  
Importance of EE opportunities are in your degree

PROMPTS:  
  o Importance of specific employer engagement activities / preferences  
  o Activities missing/ should there be more /less?  
  o Do you think employer engagement activities have impacted / influenced the delivery of the course / student experience / satisfaction / employability – how?

• KEY QUESTION (3)

“How important do you think EE is for other stakeholders (defined) – how important is it for career progression and social and economic well-being?”  
(reinforced on screen)

THEME / TOPIC:  
Importance of EE for other stakeholders (ie employers/industry, government, HE and related agencies)

PROMPTS:  
  o Importance for future career progression / preparation for work / contribution to societal / economic well-being etc?

• ENDING

“How important do you think the area is [EE] in a modern vocationally based degree. Other degrees? – any final comments”  
(reinforced on screen)

THEME / TOPIC:  
Importance of EE in a modern ‘vocationally based’ degree

PROMPTS:  
  o Should EE be compulsory / optional in your course programme / other HE programmes....why?  
  o Highlight ‘vocational’ elements of the course – preferred / disliked etc  
  o Any other comments regarding employer engagement /real world learning within the course and at the university?

(nb this schedule was updated / amended as the literature review and methodology developed, and questions / themes are reflective of the conceptual framework. This allowed the focus groups to enhance and support the 1-1 interviews).
Appendix C  Interview Guide

Doctorate in Education

Study Title:
Exploring student perspectives on ‘employer engagement’ in higher education and concepts associated with the learner journey/life-course”

Researcher: Lynsey Melhuish
Ethics number: ID 26543

Interview Guide

As the study is an inductive / interpretive approach, formal, structured, prescriptive questions will not be used for the interviews and instead only ‘themes/topics’ and ‘prompts’ will be introduced to encourage open/flow in discussion/conversation and to minimise researcher influence/positionality and pre-conceived perspectives. This was also informed from the initial focus group feedback. Themes and prompts will be focused around the following elements (reflective of the original research questions):

• OPENING TOPIC – RECALL PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

“Can you tell me a little bit about your life before coming to university, what were you doing (work/education/other), what options were you considering and what were your career aspirations?”

PROMPTS:
- Life experiences / education /work / other
- Involvement with schools / colleges / career tutors / family / friends / employers
- Cross roads in life
- Other factors
- Attractions to HE, and other options
- Reservations

• THEME 1: PRE-HE SELECTION: LEARNER BACKGROUND and DECISION-MAKING

“Can you tell me how you came to the decision to come to university in the end”

PROMPTS:
- Motives / incentives
- Influence of schools / colleges / career tutors / family / friends / employers in decision-making
- Other influences
- Overcoming reservations
- Why HE over other options?

• THEME 2: DECISION-MAKING TO GO TO UNIVERSITY

“What made you choose your selected university and course? Tell me how you came to these decisions”

PROMPTS:
- Motives / incentives to come to HEI and course selection
- Influence of schools / colleges / career tutors / family / friends / employers in decision-making
- Other influences / factors
Appendix C

**THEME 4: UNIVERSITY and COURSE LIFE**

“Tell me about some of your most memorable moments since coming to university”

**PROMPTS:**
- First year – induction / welcome week
- Ongoing experiences in the first year (academic/ personal / social / professional)
- Second year experiences (academic/ personal / social / professional)
- Second year experiences (academic/ personal / social / professional)
- Third year experiences (academic/ personal / social / professional)
- Thoughts, feelings, experiences (positive and negative)

**THEME 5: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EE and ASSOCIATED TERMS**

“Tell me what you understand by the term ‘employer engagement?’”

**PROMPTS:**
- Further terms: real world learning / professional experience / employability skills
- Similarities / differences between terms
- Examples for clarity
- Opinion/ thoughts on terminology

**THEME 6: STUDENT EXPERIENCES and REFLECTIONS ON EE OPPORTUNITIES**

“Can you talk to me about EE opportunities you have experienced and/or been offered through the course”

**PROMPTS:**
- Identify employer engagement activities undertaken in the first year, second year, final year
- Experiences gained / skills, knowledge, advancement/improvement?
- Thoughts / feelings / reflections – any influence / impact
- Positive / negative perspectives

**THEME 7: IMPORTANCE OF EE IN THE COURSE**

“Reflecting on your experiences over the three years of the degree, how important do you think EE is as part of the course”

**PROMPTS:**
- Justify responses/ provide examples and/or evidence to support
- As part of career progression / employability
- Importance of specific employer engagement activities / preferences
- Activities missing/ should there be more /less?
- Course structure / timetables / format
- How has EE impacted / influenced the delivery of the course / student experience / satisfaction / employability
- Should EE be compulsory / optional in your course programme / other HE programmes....why?
- Highlight ‘vocational’ elements of the course – preferred / disliked etc

**THEME 8: IMPORTANCE OF EE TO OTHER STAKEHOLDERS and SOCIAL MOBILITY**

“Reflecting on your EE experiences over the course, how important do you think EE is for other stakeholders”

**PROMPTS:**
Appendix C

- Stakeholders: employers / industry / government / HE / other agencies
- Importance for future career progression / preparation for work / contribution to societal / economic well-being etc?

### CLOSING THEME: FURTHER / GENERAL COMMENTS ON EE AS PART OF THE LEARNER JOURNEY WITHIN HE

“Reflecting on your experience across the three years, can you provide any final comments regarding employer engagement opportunities and your own personal learner journey

**PROMPTS:**

- Any other comments regarding employer engagement / real world learning within the course and at the university?

(nb this guide was updated / amended as the literature review and methodology developed, and questions / themes are reflective of the conceptual framework. This included the focus group responses to inform the questions.)
Appendix D  Ethics documentation

**SSEGM ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE APPLICATION FORM**

*Please note:*

- **You must not begin data collection for your study until ethical approval has been obtained.**
- **It is your responsibility to follow the University of Southampton’s Ethics Policy and any relevant academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data.**
- **It is also your responsibility to provide full and accurate information in completing this form.**

1. Name(s): Lynsey Marie Melhuish

2. Current Position  Second year EdD student at the University of Southampton and full time Course Leader at Southampton HEI University

3. Contact Details:
   Division/School  The Graduate School (University of Southampton)
   Email  lmm1e15@soton.ac.uk
   Phone  07887816260

4. Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?
   Yes ☒   No ☐

5. If Yes, please give the name of your supervisor
   Michael Tomlinson

6. Title of your project:
A case study investigation, examining student perspectives on the importance of employer engagement in higher education

7. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study

Rationale (extract summarised from the RESM6202 Research Design and Practice assessment – references available)

UK universities are finding themselves under increasing pressure from government regarding the delivery of higher education (HE); to strengthen university-employer co-operation in areas such as student placements, graduate internships, knowledge exchange, enterprise and work-based learning. The overarching theme is ‘employer engagement’ (EE) within HE and its application today and for the future. In a changing world with modern, competitive and economic pressures, universities are integral in developing graduates with the right skills, knowledge and attitudes to prepare them for any work situation and with the ability to adapt and innovate as the modern world requires. However, it is arguably just as important to examine the impact of EE activities from the student perspective to satisfy the ‘student experience’. This can often get lost in a sea of political and economic ‘policy and pontification’.

Exploration of EE from more contemporary/vocational undergraduate degrees is particularly important in a growing age of widening participation and inclusion. There appears continued pressure on HE institutes (HEIs) to justify ‘real-world’ learning that engage less traditional students and ensures successful careers after graduation. This research will provide in depth exploration into one post-1992 HEI delivering a vocationally based undergraduate degree. This will examine student perspectives on EE activities used to enhance the student experience/learner journey and in relation to wider stakeholder objectives and policy, to inform future EE strategy within HEIs and beyond.

Research Questions and Objectives

A range of inter-related questions help define the parameters of the study, recognise stakeholders and consider the ‘student experience’ as outlined below:

- How is EE defined, what activities does it include and what are the different stakeholder perspectives relating to HE institutes?
- What are the student’s thoughts, feelings, reflections on EE opportunities offered over the course of the ‘learner journey’ and has student knowledge, skills and experiences developed and/or been advanced/improved? (and how?)
- Do students feel EE opportunities are important, what activities are preferred and how does it impact on the student experience/satisfaction and overall learner journey?
- Is EE as important to students as policy and related publications would indicate that it is for other stakeholders (ie employers/industry, government, HE and related agencies). Does it reinforce or contradict policy?
- What impact does EE have on vocationally based undergraduate degrees within post-1992 HE institutions, from the student perspective?

Questions will be adapted/amended as the proposal evolves reflecting a flexible/fluid design and enabling an aim and objectives to be produced to help frame the study:

Aim

Examine student perspectives on the importance of EE within a BA Hons degree, delivered at a post-1992 HE institute;

Objectives

1. Review existing literature and theoretical, practical and political concepts of EE in the HE environment in the UK;
2. Analyse up to 16, Level 6 (year 3), student perspectives on the EE experiences provided across a three year course, analysing:
   a. secondary material (15/16 – 17/18) eg KPI’s / DLHE / NSS data / self-assessment skills test/ work placement journals;
b. primary data from 17/18, on student reflections thoughts, feelings, opinions on EE activities; and associated experiences, satisfaction, knowledge/skills obtained; across the 3 year learner journey

3. Evaluate student perspectives of EE in comparison to stakeholder objectives / strategies and policy;

4. Evaluate the benefits of EE for non-traditional students studying a vocational undergraduate degree, within a post-1992 HE institute.

These questions and related objectives inform the research paradigm and methodology for the study.

8. Describe the design of your study

The study proposes an interpretive paradigm supported by an initial literature review to set the scene, without losing the opportunity for the inductive exploration of new and evolving themes. A triangulation approach will be undertaken, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon. Interviews and focus groups will be used to collate interpretative, narrative evidence, supported with existing statistical data (KPI’s, EE tests, DLHE (destination) and other relevant secondary material (eg work-based assessment journals). Whilst the primary focus is on qualitative methods, secondary material will be utilised to enhance the investigation and to provide a coherent overall picture. The diagram below provides an overview of the research design framework:
9. Who are the research participants?

A case study featuring one cohort from the BA Hons Adventure and Outdoor Management degree programme at Southampton HEI University provides the focus of the study. This involves 16 students who registered and enrolled on the programme in the academic year 2015/16 and who will be in their final year (17/18) as the primary research is collated. These students will be asked to reflect across their 3 year experience on the course.

10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?

Access to secondary material (ensuring confidentiality / anonymity) will be through the researcher’s own role as Course Leader for the case study focus. Access will be subject to gatekeeper approval from Southampton HEI University (see attached document).

11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?

Please upload a copy of the information sheet if you are using one – or if you are not using one please explain why.

Before embarking on the research all students on the case study programme will be informed of the study, the aim, objectives, methodology, and my position as an ‘insider’ as Course Leader/tutor (to ensure integrity / transparency in the study). A participant information sheet (attached) will be distributed (see attached) and informed consent sought from each individual student.

12. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.

No

13. If you answered 'no' to question 12, how will you obtain the consent of participants?

Please upload a copy of the consent form if you are using one – or if you are not using one please explain why.

As explained in section 11 (see attached consent form)

14. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

No

15. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff) what plans do you have to obtain permission to approach the participants to take part in the study?

N/A None of the students on the case study programme are under the responsibility or care of others.
Appendix D

16. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants. Please attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic list to be used.

Participation will involve contribution to ‘focus groups’ and 1-1 interviews. The format for the focus groups and interview schedule will be informed from the questions set out in section 7. However, as this is an inductive / interpretive approach, it is proposed that formal, structured, prescriptive questions will not be used for the focus groups / interviews and instead only ‘themes/topics’ and ‘prompts’ will be introduced to encourage open/flow in discussion/conversation and to minimise researcher influence/positionality and pre-conceived perspectives. An overview of the focus group / interview schedule themes is attached.

17. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?

This is made clear within the Consent form and will be reiterated before each focus group / interview.

18. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and you will deal with this.

No distress / discomfort, inconvenience or other adverse effects are envisaged as focus groups and 1-1 interviews will be undertaken as part of the standard programme (through tutorial / workshop sessions already allocated). It is made clear within the information sheet (and will be reiterated) that any feedback from the focus groups / 1-1 interviews has NO influence / impact on each student’s own performance / progression / status within the programme (and will be confidential / anonymised). It is acknowledged that the researcher’s position as a Course Leader/Tutor may influence this as they are an insider to the process and students may feel influenced by this position. However, continued transparency / openness will be reiterated through the process and as a contingency, a ‘third party’ researcher (from the Southampton HEI University staff team), not associated to the programme, may be considered to undertake one or more of the focus groups and/or 1-1 interviews if any adverse effects are observed. However, the researcher’s position as an ‘insider’ is more beneficial / positive (having formed a good relationship with all students to ensure a comfortable / relaxed environment) in contrast to any potential negative effects. Neutrality of the focus group / interview environment will also be important to ensure students feel relaxed/comfortable when engaging in discussion, therefore separate classroom / interview rooms will be allocated for data collection activities.

19. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?

Names of students will be anonymised through a coded system to maximise confidentiality through collection, analysis and write up. Focus groups and interviews will be conducted in suitable interview rooms / classrooms to maximise confidentiality in the process but recognising that focus groups will involve shared discussion with other students present from the same course programme. It is acknowledged that whilst individual student names can be anonymised and associated data can remain confidential, any future write up / publications is likely to be associated to the researcher’s own institute and the case study course programme (BA Hons Adventure and Outdoor Management degree). Therefore, the limitations of this anonymity / confidentiality will be made clear to the participants as part of their ‘informed consent’. Whilst student names can be fully anonymised, recognition of the programme/institute and years of study they are associated to, cannot be guaranteed.

20. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?
The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html.

All data (and recording devices) will be stored in locked/password protected storage (physical and/or electronic) and access to any secondary material for the purposes of this study, will be managed in the same way and subject to the Data Protection Act 1998 and associated HEI policy/protocol (as the researcher is an employee of this institution), alongside the University of Southampton Research Data Management Policy. Only the researcher will have access (and this will be extended to any additional researchers who may be brought in to aid the data collection from a ‘third party’ perspective (who will be a member of HEI staff and therefore will be compliant with ethical/safety procedures/associated policy).

21. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.

An initial draft analysis of findings/outcomes and conclusions and recommendations will be provided to participants and with an invitation for discussion/questions/issues to be raised, prior to final submission. Participants will also be offered the final submission on request.

22. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

The study will ensure that research ethics are fully addressed and that, as previously recognised, integrity, transparency and quality in the design and conduct of the research is paramount. Key principles regarding informed consent/voluntary participation have been addressed in section 11; confidentiality and anonymity issues have been addressed in sections 19 and storage/handling of data in section 20. There are minimal safety issues associated with this research as it will be conducted within a standard university programme and on campus in normal university hours, using appropriate resources/technologies (including safe recording devices) to satisfy ‘avoidance of harm’ and/or associated safety implications whilst undertaking the research. In addition to this the researcher’s own positionality has been highlighted regarding independence and impartiality, and acknowledgement of their ‘insider’ status will be highlighted transparently/overtly to all participants and throughout the thesis process and write up. As previously highlighted (in section 18), contingency plans including consideration of a ‘third party’ researcher to undertaken focus group/1-1 interviews will be considered during the methodology stages and will be utilised if necessary to minimise negative insider influence. Furthermore, limitations regarding the positionality of the researcher will be recognised in a thorough, critical statement provided in the methodology with proposals to counteract/combat any challenges raised. The ‘insider’ perspective and the researcher’s preference of an interpretive paradigm brings with it the risk of subjectivity/bias as the less tangible aspects of educational research are explored. Exposing this, alongside underlying beliefs/meta-ethics associated to the study themes, transparently, and accepting these influences, will strengthen the robustness, trustworthiness and overall credibility/quality of the research design.

23. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.

All information has been addressed above and in the supporting documentation.
EVIDENCE OF APPROVAL:

GATEKEEPER APPROVAL FOR PROPOSED EdD THESIS

Study Title:
“A case study investigation, examining student perspectives on the importance of ‘employer engagement’ in higher education”

Researcher: Lynsey Melhuish

Outline of research:
The ‘student experience’ is key to effective delivery of higher education to undergraduates, and the integration of ‘employer engagement’ and ‘real world’ learning are recognised as essential components. Collaboration between industry and universities is integral to the ‘skills and innovation supply chain’ and ensuring students receive the practical and operational employment skills, experience and knowledge to enable effective progression into successful careers after graduation. The proposed thesis for the Doctorate of Education at the University of Southampton, is based on the 2015/16 entry cohort as a case study for research, to review the progress and development of students as they journey through the course, focusing closely on the employer engagement activities integrated within the programme and the subsequent impact this has on the student experience.

The case study will explore the student journey from the start of the course at Level 4, and across Level 5 and 6, culminating in 2017/18 completion. Research methodology focuses on utilising secondary material collated as part of the standard Course Leader role during this period, analysing student feedback from the Work Based Engagement/real world’ activities and Primary research will be undertaken utilising focus groups and 1-1 interviews involving up to 14 students active on the programme. This will be subject to ethical approval (by the University of Southampton), ensuring anonymity/confidentiality is addressed appropriately and including informed consent from each individual student. The research will not interfere with the normal delivery of the programme, assessments and/or contravene University policy/protocol and will run in conjunction with existing systems in place to monitor progress and performance. The researcher’s role as an ‘insider’ will be fully acknowledged and will be transparent to all participants taking part. Furthermore, participants will have the right to withdraw at any time.
Participant Information Sheet

Study Title:

“A case study investigation, examining student perspectives on the importance of ‘employer engagement’ in higher education”

Researcher: Lynsey Melhuish

Ethics number: ID 26543

Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

The ‘student experience’ is key to effective delivery of higher education to undergraduates, and the integration of ‘employer engagement’ and ‘real world’ learning are recognised as essential components. Collaboration between industry/university is integral to the ‘skills and innovation supply chain’ and ensuring students receive the practical and operational employment skills, experience and knowledge to enable effective progression into successful careers after graduation. The proposed thesis for the Doctorate in Education at the University of Southampton, is based on the researcher’s own professional role as Course Leader for the BA Hons degree programme at HEI. The researcher has selected the 2015/16 entry cohort as a case study for research, to review the progress and development of students as they journey through the course,
focusing closely on the employer engagement activities integrated within the programme and the subsequent impact this has on the student experience.

Why have I been chosen?

The adventure and outdoor industry is particularly dynamic, fast paced and ever-changing and relies on graduates that can demonstrate transferable, employability (real-world/vocational) skills, knowledge and experience in the workplace. The BA Hons Adventure and Outdoor Management degree has recently been reviewed and enhanced (building and developing on the last 25 years of success in outdoor programmes since evolution at HEI). The programme has been designed to ensure maximum opportunity for undergraduates to experience ‘real world’ vocational learning and professional experience, alongside academic study and therefore provides the perfect case study as a focus of research.

What will happen to me if I take part?

The case study will explore the student journey from the start of the course at Level 4, and across Level 5 and 6, culminating in 2017/18 completion. Research methodology focuses on utilising secondary material collated as part of the standard Course Leader role during this period, analysing results of employability questionnaires and assessment content from the Work Based Professional Studies unit (ITE508) and related ‘employer engagement/real world’ activities and associated feedback, assessments and data (DLHE/NSS etc). Primary research will be undertaken utilising focus groups and 1-1 interviews involving up to 16 students active on the programme. This will be subject to ethical approval (by the University of Southampton), ensuring anonymity/confidentiality is addressed appropriately and including informed consent from each individual student. The research will not interfere with the normal delivery of the programme, assessments and/or contravene HEI policy/protocol and will run in conjunction with existing systems in place to monitor progress and performance. Any feedback / contribution made by individual students has NO impact on performance / progression or status.
Are there any benefits in my taking part?

By being aware and involved in the research project, students will have an enhanced knowledge and understanding of research methodology and process which will aid their own research activities as part of the Research Methods and Dissertation units as well as consideration for future post-graduate studies. Furthermore, students involved in the project will receive additional 1-1 and group access with the Course Leader/Tutor, to reflect on performance/progress, whilst being able to provide additional feedback on the student experience to enhance the course programme further.

Are there any risks involved?

Risks are very low for this study as data collection will take place on the HEI campus during normal working hours and utilising standard university facilities and resources. All standard HEI policy / protocol for student and staff safety/security/ethical practice will apply, in conjunction with a full ethics approval process through the University of Southampton. It is recognised that the ‘researcher’ is the Course Leader/Tutor for the case study course being studied and is therefore recognised as ‘an insider’ to the research process. Feedback/outcomes from this study will not impact/influence participants (students) negatively and the process will remain fully transparent at all times. A ‘third party’ researcher (from the HEI staff team) will facilitate data collection (focus groups and/or 1-1 interviews) if students (participants) would prefer this and/or if the role of the researcher as an ‘insider’ is recognised as having a detrimental effect on the quality/integrity of the research process.

Will my participation be confidential?

The research process will be compliant with the Data Protection Act 1998 and related HEI and the University of Southampton policies, ensuring confidentiality of all data/materials collated, analysed and utilised as part of this process. It should be recognised that as part of a case study and with focus group and related group activity, the process cannot be fully anonymised. However, all individual student (participant) names will be anonymised and data coded in production of reports/publications/presentations. All information will remain confidential.
and stored securely and/or on password protected computers/IT. Whilst individual student names will be anonymised within the process the university (HEI), course (degree) and years of study (15.16 - 17.18) will not be anonymised, therefore association could be made in future publications.

What happens if I change my mind?

Students (participants) have a right to withdraw at any time and without needing to give any reason. There will be no consequence for an individual during their study on the degree at HEI.

A full copy of the submission can be provided at the participant’s request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, please contact: Head of Research Governance, University of Southampton, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk +44 (0) 2380 595058

Student-First (at HEI) can also be accessed for any support / counselling requirements should the study raise any distress / anxiety.

Where can I get more information?

Contact the researcher: lynsey.melhuish@HEI.ac.uk for any further information on the project.
CONSENT FORM

Study title:

“A case study investigation, examining student perspectives on the importance of ‘employer engagement’ in higher education”

Researcher name: Lynsey Melhuish

Ethics reference: ID 26543

Please initial the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information sheet (12th May 2017, 2.2017) and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study

I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study

I understand that my responses will be anonymised in reports of the research

I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without consequence
Data Protection

I understand that information collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on a password protected computer and that this information will only be used for the purposes of this study.

Name of participant (print name)…………………………………………………………

Signature of participant……………………………………………………………………

Name of Researcher (print name) Lynsey Melhuish

Signature of Researcher……………………………………………………………………

Date: ……………………………………………………………

(N.B All signed and completed consent forms available on request)
Appendix D

September 2016

Risk Assessment Form for Assessing Ethical and Research Risks

- Please see Guidance Notes at the end of this document.
- **Students**: Please make sure you have discussed this form with your supervisor!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher’s name:</th>
<th>Lynsey Melhuish</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In case of students:</td>
<td>Michael Tomlinson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervisor’s name:</td>
<td>EdD (Doctorate in Education)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Part 1 – Research activities**

What do you intend to do? *(Please provide a brief description of your study and details of your proposed methods.)*

The research involves a case study examining student perspectives on the importance of employer engagement within a degree, delivered at a post-1992 HE institute. The study proposes an interpretive paradigm and a triangulation approach which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon. Interviews and focus groups will be used to collate interpretative, narrative evidence, supported by existing statistical data (KPI’s, EE tests, DLHE (destination) and other relevant secondary material (e.g. work-based assessment journals). Whilst the primary focus is on qualitative methods, secondary material will be utilised to enhance the investigation and to provide a coherent overall picture.

Will your research involve collection of information from other people? *(If yes, please provide a description of your proposed sample.)*

Yes, the research will involve collecting information from other people. A case study featuring one cohort from the BA Hons Adventure and Outdoor Management degree programme at HEI provides the focus of the study. This involves 16 students who registered and enrolled on the programme in the academic year 2015/16 and who will be in their final year (17/18) as the primary research is collated. These students will be asked to reflect across their 3 year experience on the course.

If relevant, what locations are involved? *(Please specify which country/region/place you will be working in, and details of where data collection activities will take place (e.g. public or private space).)*

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All research activity (data collection) will take place at the researcher’s own workplace: HEI. All data collection will take place on campus in appropriate classroom / interview rooms.

Will you be working alone or with others in the data collection process?

The researcher will initially work alone in collecting data. However, as highlighted in the ethics process, this will be reviewed during the methodology/ initial data collection stages. If the researcher’s role as an ‘insider’ appears to be influencing the data collection process then a ‘third party’ researcher may be allocated to undertake the focus groups and/or interviews. This person work be selected from the HEI staff team and will therefore be protected / compliant with University ethics/safety policy. This is purely a contingency option though and it is most likely the researcher will undertake all data collection personally.

Part 2 – Potential risks to YOU as the researcher

Please specify potential safety issues arising from your proposed research activity. (Give consideration to aspects such as lone working, risky locations, risks associated with travel; please assess the likelihood and severity of risks.) If you have already completed a departmental HandS risk assessment, this may be attached to cover these aspects.

Safety issues are very low as the case study is based at the researcher’s own place of work which is covered by appropriate safety / security / ethical protocol/policy. All data collection will take place on HEI campus, in normal university working hours and utilising university facilities and resources (ie classrooms / interview rooms and associated recording equipment).

What precautions will you take to minimise these risks?

Focus groups and 1-1 interviews will take place in appropriate glass fronted rooms to minimise any safety / security / ethical issues both to the researcher and the participants. Should any safety / security / ethical issues occur on campus at the time of data collection then standard University procedures will apply (eg fire alarms / evacuation etc).

Please specify potential distress or harm to YOU arising from your proposed research activity. (Give consideration to the possibility that you may be adversely affected by something your participants share with you. This may include information of a distressing, sensitive or illegal nature.)

None, the nature of the topic (employer engagement) and the student’s perspective on their ‘learner journey’ has low impact on the researcher’s own position at the university. Whilst criticism / dissatisfaction may be raised in discussion, this is part of the researcher’s standard role in gaining student feedback as part of the course.

What precautions will you take to minimise these risks?

Discuss any concerns raised with line management if necessary. The line manager has already approved the study (as gatekeeper).

Part 3 – Potential risks to YOUR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
Please consider potential safety risks to participants from taking part in your
proposed research activity? (Give consideration to aspects such as location of the
research, risks associated with travel, strain from participation, and assess the
likelihood and severity of risks.) If you have already completed a departmental
HandS risk assessment, this may be attached to cover these aspects.

None. All data collection will take place on HEI campus, in normal university working
hours and utilising university facilities and resources (ie classrooms / interview
rooms and associated recording equipment). Research will take place in the
participant’s natural ‘student’ environment.

What precautions will you take and/or suggest to your participants to minimise
these risks?

Focus groups and 1-1 interviews will take place in appropriate glass fronted rooms
to minimise any safety / security / ethical issues both to the researcher and the
participants. Should any safety / security / ethical issues occur on campus at the
time of data collection then standard University procedures will apply (eg fire alarms
/ evacuation etc).

Students (participants) have the right to withdraw at any time.

Please specify potential harm or distress that might affect your participants as a
result of taking part in your research. (Give consideration to aspects such as
emotional distress, anxiety, unmet expectations, unintentional disclosure of
participants’ identity, and assess the likelihood and severity of risks.)

No distress / discomfort, inconvenience or other adverse effects are envisaged as
focus groups and 1-1 interviews will be undertaken as part of the standard
programme (through tutorial / workshop sessions already allocated). It is made
clear within the information sheet (and will be reiterated) that any feedback from
the focus groups / 1-1 interviews has NO influence / impact on each student’s own
performance / progression / status within the programme (and will be confidential
/ anonymised). It is acknowledged that the researcher’s position as a Course
Leader/Tutor may influence this as they are an insider to the process and students
may feel influenced by this position. However, continued transparency / openness
will be reiterated through the process and as a contingency, a ‘third party’
researcher (from the HEI staff team), not associated to the programme, may be
considered to undertake one or more of the focus groups and/or 1-1 interviews if
any adverse effects are observed. Focus groups / 1-1 interviews will take place in
neutral campus facilities (classrooms / interview rooms) to ensure participants are
relaxed and comfortable.

What precautions will you take and/or suggest to your participants to minimise
these risks?

As above, plus students already have a clear process for accessing support /
counselling, should any issues / distress / anxiety be raised (though this is not
envisaged due to the nature of the topic). If distress/anxiety is observed then
students will be directed to ‘Student-First’ at HEI (the university support/counselling
team).

Students (participants) have a right to withdraw at any time.

Part 4 – Potential wider risks
Does your planned research pose any additional risks as a result of the sensitivity of the research and/or the nature of the population(s) or location(s) being studied? (Give considerations to aspects such as impact on the reputation of your discipline or institution; impact on relations between researchers and participants, or between population sub-groups; social, religious, ethnic, political or other sensitivities; potential misuse of findings for illegal, discriminatory or harmful purposes; potential harm to the environment; impacts on culture or cultural heritage.)

The researcher’s own positionality has been reviewed regarding independence and impartiality (as Course Leader/Tutor for the case study course programme to be studied). It has been acknowledged that the researcher has ‘insider’ status which will be highlighted transparently/overtly to all participants and throughout the thesis process and write up. As previously highlighted (in section 18), contingency plans including consideration of a ‘third party’ researcher to undertaken focus group / 1-1 interviews will be considered during the methodology stages and will be utilised if necessary to minimise negative insider influence. Furthermore, limitations regarding the positionality of the researcher will be recognised in a thorough, critical statement provided in the methodology with proposals to counteract / combat any challenges raised. Whilst the study outcomes will not influence the researcher’s own role directly, it will have the potential to influence future development of the course / programmes. Therefore, this will be highlighted.

What precautions will you take to minimise these risks?

Ensure transparency through the process. The ‘insider’ perspective and the researcher’s preference of an interpretive paradigm brings with it the risk of subjectivity/bias as the less tangible aspects of educational research are explored. Exposing this as part of the methodology, alongside underlying beliefs/meta-ethics associated to the study themes, transparently, and accepting these influences, will strengthen the robustness, trustworthiness and overall credibility/quality of the research design.

Part 5 – International Travel

If your activity involves international travel you must meet the Faculty’s requirements for Business Travel which are intended to:

1. Inform managers/supervisors of the travel plans of staff and students and identify whether risk assessment is required.
2. Provide contact information to staff and students whilst travelling (insurance contact details, University contact in case of emergency etc.)

Full details are provided in the Faculty HandS Handbook in the Business Travel section. Selecting Business Travel from the Contents list will take you straight to the relevant section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Departmental H and S risk assessment attached (for Part 2/3)</th>
<th>YES / NO</th>
<th>(Delete as applicable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Travel and Risk Filter Form attached (Part 5)</td>
<td>YES / NO</td>
<td>(Delete as applicable)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E  Focus group - illustration of initial analysis and emerging 3 themes

STAGE 1: Initial coding (labelling of recoccurring words/phrases)

- Deferring / gap year / year out
- Didn’t know what to do
- Bored
- Not originally going to uni / didn’t want to go to Uni
- Wanting to broaden horizons
- No HE plans / clear HE plans
- Clearing / last minute decision
- Last minute UCAS application
- Alternative options (military)
- Unsure / nervous of HE
- Solent reputation (post HE vs pre HE)
- Halls not too far / access to uni
- Good living options
- Coastal – access to water sports
- Wanted to be near the sea
- Close to home / farthest from home
- Did alright at school – got sick of being taught at college
- Failed college
- Didn’t do well at school

STAGE 2: Categorising (grouping topics / patterns)

- Career path / future goals / aspirations / unknown
  - Keeping doors open
  - Not focusing on one area
  - Broad overview of subjects
  - Only course offering what I was looking for
  - Management / management based
  - Only course / one of only a few
  - Found a bunch of other stuff through it
  - Didn’t want a degree in history / traditional subjects & wonder what to do with it / interested in topic for a career / business opportunity

- Pre-HE life
  - Course influences
  - Location influences
  - Family / friend influences
  - School / college influences

- My sister came here
  - Family and friends were doing sailing
  - Scared out of it by my family / didn’t see the value
  - I was the first to go
## Appendix E

**STAGE 1: Initial coding**
*(labelling of recurring words/phrases)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of placements (incorporating wider perspectives)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate job opportunities / non-graduate job opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics applicable to life after college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on subject areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance CV's / interviews / experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps if you don't know what to do / learning curve / see situations in action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life after university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental for the course / very important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes the degree more tangible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They look for experience / people skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Really important to make the degree real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni influence – see what can be achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR / reputation of the course in industry (post- vs pre / traditional vs vocational)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business opportunities / contemporary issues / innovation / research / change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be aware of what's going on in industry and how we fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning by doing / learning in action / theory to practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future career paths / importance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Placements - more / less (compulsory &amp; optional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich programmes (pre &amp; post)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetables - more vs less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE essential / active learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer engagement impact &amp; terms / experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employer engagement definitions / activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trips / practical / talks outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student wants / demands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trips not pushed enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More trips / NGBs / expeditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse practices / out of comfort zone / niche trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big company networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing timetables (less hours vs more)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter &amp; summer placement opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance support (e.g., cost of NGBs / placement travel / time)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## STAGE 2: Categorising
*(grouping topics / patterns)*

### Employer engagement impact & terms / experiences

- Reflective writing / critical thinking
- NGB opportunities
- Conference
- Talks / Networking
- Potential employers
- Training / skills / CPD
- Assessments
- Real world experience
- Internships
- Free work / volunteering

### Placement outcomes

- [Outdoor residential] - opening opportunities / jobs
- Real world experience
- Going out & working at the centre
- Learn a lot about how the centres work
- Talking about own experiences
- See what companies do
- Brings us all together again / enforced fun

### Employer engagement definitions / activities

- Recruitment
- Placements
- People engaging with us
- Alumni
- Learning on the job
- Real world vocational learning
- Personal / company driven
- Don't like term / prefer industry engagement / differing views
- Incentives

- Very valuable
- Good & bad experiences
- Doing something completely different
- Pushing relationships outside of uni / challenges / adventurous placements
- Industry side
- Personal
- See areas I want to go into
- Broadening horizons

- Mixed it / timings didn't work
- Lazy
- Lifestyle / university lifestyle
- Changing timetables (incomm to university)
- Motivation
- Student responsibilities
Appendix F  NVivo illustration of comparison of focus group categories
Appendix G  Summary of re-aligned themes (4) from interview analysis

### Pre-HE life
- Significant people in influencing decisions pre-HE: Shared factors of influence (parents/friends/social/course elements etc.) vs very individualistic influences (personal life experiences/character & personality) & throughout the learner journey
- Reputation of uni/post-1992/NSQs/tables/stats — no influence on decision, students more defiant once overcoming initial challenges of family etc
- Course content (management) significant influence on decision making (tangible/material NOT symbolic)
- Underlying shared issues/patterns: non-traditional — first to go to uni/lacking in confidence/modest/self-deprecating — surface and sub conscious anxiety/fear "not academic"
- Prefer alternative (vocational/non-traditional)
- Routes of students wide range of subject areas (Alevel/SITECs)
- Didn't know what to do/reflective of modern student — more demanding (some wanting escapism...potentially specific to industry is adventure/wanderlust)
- Conflict — paradoxical view point — student demanding (see paying/resilience) vs non-traditional — lacking in confidence/self-esteem etc

### Employer Engagement terms
- Confused understanding/knowledge/interpretation of employer engagement, real world learning, employability skills
- Agreement/recognition of complexities of terms used / dislike of 'employer engagement' — not seen as related to HEIs without prompting
- Some shared suggestions for simplification of terms used by HEIs, some preference for real world learning/industry engagement

### Employer engagement experiences impact & importance
- First year residential is mentioned continually as a significant influence both practically (links with employers/security of placements etc.) and personally (social bonding/confidence/team building) for the cohort
- Placements (benefits/ongoing & trajectory opportunities (securing future jobs)/repeat placements/personal/professional benefits/networking for future opportunities
- Trips/visits/networking/informed for future career progression/nurseries examples of personal/professional benefits
- ESE test (university online self reflective survey) — generally criticised/poor measure/flawed, qualitative alternative suggested
- The Employability Service (university employability support) — generally little known &/or accessed about services/students do not engage
- Balance of employer engagement opportunities generally supported/numerous benefits demonstrated/few criticisms
- Recognition of other stakeholder perspectives on EE limited across the board (focused on recruitment/placement opportunities) — students generally do not recognize bigger economic perspective (macro policy)

### Future direction life path (new theme)
- Reflexivity on horizons for action — outcomes: more confident/resilient/knowledgeable/academically & operationally/breadth of career opportunities recognised/preparation for management positions
- Course specific implications post-graduation (wanderlust/travel aspirations — potential negative impact/skewed stats on national KPI’s eg DLHE)
Appendix H  NVivo illustrations of theme 1 analysis

NVivo, associated categories and levels of reoccurrence

### Pre - Higher Education

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Files</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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<tr>
<td>Course influences</td>
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<td>School &amp; college influences</td>
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<td>HE reputation, image atmosphere</td>
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<td>Location influences</td>
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<td>Friend influences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial implications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employer or industry influences</td>
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<td>16</td>
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NVivo percentage of label/category content per interview transcript

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Appendix I  

Extracts from focus groups: patterns pre-HE

“I was a bit bored at home”
“...probably cos I’m a bit stupid really”
“I was like that....I left it to the last minute to apply to UCAS...”
“I’d had a gap year......got sick of it”
“I will say, like that we are the sort of people that learn better by doing something rather than like.....reading a book, we learn better when we sort of see it in action”
(Focus group 1)

“so I came here through clearing”
“so I looked on clearing on the last day”
“I didn’t want to come to uni to be honest it was kind of one of those things where I applied on a whim...”
“I didn’t want to go to uni either”
“....um I kind of just wanted to get on with life and not do more education....cos I didn’t really do very well at school”
“I didn’t want to go to uni....I deferred my place for a year ....so I could have some time out”
“I kind of flaked a bit at college”
“Once I was at college I was like awww I’m sick of this .....so I took a year out”
(Focus group 2)
Appendix J  
Additional evidence: learner backgrounds, behaviours and cultures

“I did BTEC... at um... in high school as well... it was kind of classed as the thing you did if you were a drop out so our class was about ten of us and it was pretty much that everyone in the class was the... what everyone was termed as the problem kinda class...”  (Noelle)

“I wasn’t very good at school... I’ve never been very good at... I’ve got dyslexia as well but the BTEC... is not like a... BTEC... it’s not an easy option but... um... funner... I guess than doing Alevel...”

“I got like an F in the exam and an A star in the coursework so that’s why the BTEC was good”  (Lara)

“I wasn’t very good at taking exams...”  (Noelle)

“I think that kind of was the peak of all the... me being really bad at school and kind of stuff... and not focusing at all...”

“I was drumming classes and not showing up and stuff like that...”

“I think that was part of the mistake I made at A level... was doing something that I thought I should do...”  [history] (Grant)

“...my college course which... was 100% coursework and that sort of inspired me rather than exams...”  (Ben)

“...just because it was easier [BTEC] and I didn’t know what I wanted to do at the time so...”

“... whilst there was some writing involved the majority of it was practical...”

“... I just wanted something practical at school cos I wasn’t used to... I don’t... I didn’t really like exams...”

“my family are very working class...”  (Nel)

“...I knew I needed an education cos “ I didn’t exactly do brilliantly at school...”

“...I got top marks in that triple D*... cos” I always used to get taken the nick of... being that guy... the one that messed around and not going to do well...”  (Terry)

“I was competing from people with really good backgrounds... and um... sort of better education levels than me...”

“I wasn’t very good at school...”  (Noelle)

[about school]... “er... didn’t enjoy it... it wasn’t the best sort of time as others may have had...”

“A levels are not my forte...”

“...I’ve always liked being out and doing stuff...”  (Toby)

“I hated education... I was awful...”

“I hated school that much... I was like the worst... not the worst student but I was a problem... I got in trouble a lot... and got excluded twice...”  (Gary)

“It’s possibly because I’m dyslexic and I didn’t want to write a load of essays...”  (Bonnie)
Appendix J

“...yeah so none of my family have been to uni...”
“...it was a very small amount of us that went to uni from the course...” (Matt)

“...no one else had been to uni in my family...”
“I wasn’t the most academic...I was poor with that” (Toby)

“...there’s no point in my applying for a degree in these subjects...”
[traditional academic]
“...I don’t have the strongest mental health and I’m very dyslexic so all of these parts of me which could completely crumble...” (Bonnie)

“So I’m the first person in my immediate family to go away to university...”
“I don’t think I was that confident...”
“uh...I had no idea what I wanted to do...” (Debbie)

“I was the first one in my family to go to university...”
“the education wasn’t my own priority if that makes sense...”
“So I did sport & PE and I think that was the only one that would accept my credits...” (Lara)

“...I didn’t really like the course [at college]...got bad grades...”
“...I’m not academically bright at all...” (Hannah)

“...I really enjoyed it [sailing] and was actually good at it”
“I knew I wanted to get into extreme sports” (Noelle)

“...I always wanted to do something like that and sailing obviously, as I’m interested in it...that’s something I’ve always been interested in...” (Kyle)

“...I’ve always wanted to do something like that and sailing obviously, as I’m interested in it...that’s something I’ve always been interested in...”
“I’ve always wanted to do something like that and sailing obviously, as I’m interested in it...that’s something I’ve always been interested in...” (Noelle)

“my absolute love of the outdoor was developing...I’ve always liked being out and doing stuff”
“I’d always kind of wanted to go sailing too” I was in the Sea Cadets, well Marine Cadets”
“...you can go powerboating and that was really fun...I was really loving it and then I thought I do really like the sea and I like being out there” (Toby)

“I had always been interested in snowboarding and skateboarding and any other board sports and something, anything that gives you a bit of a rush...and was a bit dangerous, I’ve always been interested” (Grant)

“an obviously outdoor education, um I’ve done a lot of like, not a lot...but outdoor...um outdoor adventure stuff, guiding and all that” (Debbie)

“...I’ve always been outdoorsy and stuff”
“...everyone on the course...college course was really...massively chilled out and wanted to go live on the beach and things like that so I kind of absorbed that...” (Ben)

“...I liked the idea of practical and stuff like that” (Ben)

“...and I did 6 weeks climbing course and I looked at it and thought...I don’t wanna leave, so I went and volunteered at the climbing centre” (Bonnie)

“I just did a few courses in sailing...then I think I was 13 and they asked me if I wanted to start working there with them as an assistant instructor and I loved it...and I started competing and I just loved the whole world” (Ned)

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Appendix K  Career aspirations / HE

“...the reasons as to why I came to uni are quite focused” [goes on to discuss officer entry for military]
“I’m quite stubborn and an independent type person who when I do something I just go and do it”
“...most of that was made off my own back and I just decided that I would choose a course”
“I didn’t really need too much influencing...um...because I was very set in what I wanted to do...” (Noelle)

“...I knew I wanted to go...” (Hilary)

“...I’d always wanted to do uni”
“Like I said I did definitely want to go”
(Matt)

“...um I just thought it was the right direction to go, I wasn’t finished with education and I thought I could do a bit more”
“it was more of the fact that this was what I wanted for me, this is where I wanted to go...” (Hannah)

“I’m pretty independent so I like having my own...taking responsibility for my own life and stuff and not being around my parents all the time so I figured why not go to uni and have a bit of fun and see what happens” (Grant)

“...um.....um...I think...I don’t really know....I think it was me deciding to be honest .....I think I figured if I didn’t go I would probably end up stuck in leisure centres for the next .....however many years...” (Grant)

“...Um....I don’t really know if I’m honest...um...I think because I didn’t have any job aspirations after school, uh, I had no idea what I was going to do” (Debbie)

“Actually I think it was biding time...........I could either stay at home and do a job like everyone else does.....or .....”(Toby)

Career indecisions / gap year
“I was basically like...I don’t wanna go to uni...but I’ll do it as a back up, and have a year out...” (Gary)

“my aspirations that were sort of working in the outdoor industry and to travel the world”
“ I did a season in France....um with Acorn Adventure....”
(Ben)

“...furnished in whenever, May June...and then....I don’t really know....I mean don’t really know what...what I wanna do now and I was kinda all over the place, decided to have a gap year.....”
(Terry)

“...um....so I actually had a year out...um but I was originally never even thinking about going to uni...”
(Grant)

“...um ....I actually came to uni after my sort of gap year which was kind of horrendous [laughs] because I was just working um....in a North Face and I think after 6 months I kind of got to the end of it cos” I was just folding t-shirts and stuff.... (Noelle)
Appendix L  
Extracts of people influences

"...they never pressured me, they never said...uh...at first they were disappointed that I didn’t...I didn’t really have an interest in catering but after they were kind of like yeah...but they never really pushed me they just let me do my own thing..." (Lara)

"...she definitely was there...she always is there.....always nagging me to do this....do that..."  
"I think mum was quite happy about it...cos she would always tell her friends and that it would be good for him.....good for him in doing something different as every always does business or engineering....and its stopping out again....stepping out the circle.....going down a different direction." (Terry)

"...my mum, my dad, my step dad and my step mum to an extent were.....are all in the police....my dad has retired just....my dad was like yeah you should go to uni and get a degree....cos he wasn’t allowed to advance..."  
"My dad was like, he saw the importance of it yeah, go and get a degree in something you enjoy, get a degree in that.....even if you don’t get a job later....get one that is adaptive later....like the management aspect..."  
"everyone else is....involved in a public service in some sense which sort of...which is kind of why I came here cos I really don’t wanna be.....like I don’t find anything wrong with public services and it’s a good job but some of the horror stories that my parents and Aunty....they come back and tell me....." (Lance)

"...and my teacher Miss Summers um she was really good and she was so enthusiastic....um and it didn’t matter what kind of problems were brought to the class she kind of did get people to gauge an interest in the outdoors..."  
"...he was just different to all other lecturers.....he was really passionate about it.....um he always kind of offered a lot help and guidance..."  
"....I remember them talking to us about UCAS applications and they went through the UCAS application process with us...." (Noelle)

"so we had like someone that specifically did like stuff to do with uni and UCAS and applications...so I spoke to him and we went through different options and what would be good and things...um...obviously did all the UCAS things and she helped me with that quite a lot" (Hilary)

"...one of my English teachers...um...gave me some kind of off the record extra tuition English Alevel writing because I was competing with lots of people....sort of better education levels that me..."  
"um...he was quite influential in that he kind of supported me what I wanted to do...." (Noelle)

"...they had the whole UCAS thing and they helped you go through it all..." (Lara)

"...so they sort of prompted me, do you wanna go to uni....do you wanna go to uni.....do you wanna go to uni...they were like, it’s completely your choice....."  
"I wasn’t the most academic.....I was poor with that and so she helped.......and she said get the application in and if you don’t wanna do it... it doesn’t matter....you haven’t lost anything....they made it easy for me to do it....." (Toby)

"...there was a teacher and she kept pushing me to go to university and I was like no...I’m not going to university....it’s just not for me....and then she made me um.....she sat me down and she said find something..."  
"...so I was trying to annoy her so I typed in sailing....erm sailing....erm degree and I typed it in and I was like....I saw this course here and I was like...that actually looks pretty good...."  
"...all the teachers pushed me so that I could do better and worked with me in that way and they.....just the way they came about me....just was a lot....everything was a lot easier....and her...I never would have gone to uni but she pushed me..." (Neil)
“...it was the kind of thing where my school was pushing it to go to uni at the time and um, it was like the....they just wanted the numbers, they wanted me to apply to uni, even if I applied, got in and decided I didn’t want to do it, they were happy with that as long as I applied to uni basically...”

“It was a mix of everyone, obviously.....teachers and...like superiors and stuff at school, they were like....oh you have to go to uni cos that’s what you need to do these days.....”  

(Neil)

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<td>“...I mean they got everyone to apply to UCAS just in case but they were a lot more focused on us who actually wanted to do it...”  (Matt)</td>
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<td>“...I used to go to the careers advisor man and literally not argue with him but disagree with him a lot of the time because he used to tell me.....what I had to do and I used to say no, it’s not, I can find my own way through life” “so what I did without telling my school was I applied for this one first and I didn’t tell them, because if I had, they would never have let me do it....”  (Gary)</td>
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<th>Industry &amp; employer influence</th>
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<td>“...two of my coaches used to go to Solent ....and I spoke to them a little bit about it” “I remember doing... some RYA courses at Poole somewhere and I saw someone who was doing their work placement there and I was talking to him a little bit about it as well”  (Kile)</td>
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<td>“[referring to sailing] ”...So this Greece job came up and I did all my training...that didn’t go very well cos Greece financial state collapsed and I was left with no money....”  (Toby)</td>
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<td>“...I talked to a couple of people at the climbing centre that I was working at and asked them like how did you get here, what did you do.....the one.....the one person that had done a degree in this....said to me.....do it....it’s brilliant....”  (Bonnie)</td>
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<td>“[referring to Waitrose] ”...I had opportunities to climb that ladder, they already wanted me to do things, there was an assistant section manager at the time and it’s where they wanted me to go....and I was just like....I don’t want to do that....it pays nicely but I won’t be happy....”  (Gary)</td>
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<td>“...I was thinking, maybe trying to stick it with Acorn Adventure at the time, but then my second season fell though.........the management at the centre had all changed and the management never really managed an outdoor centre before.......and it just....mind boggled me why they were in that position.....”  (Ben)</td>
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Appendix M  Attraction and influence to come to the HEI

Vocational and related influence of location:

“I was coming to Southampton because of the sailing....”  (Kile)

“I liked the sound of Southampton....it just sounded nice and there’s boats, so I was like....and that’s....that’s another reason why....a lot of boats down here....there was a lot going on like, with the boat shows and stuff as well”  (Nel)

“there was quite a big appeal at having the water sports centre”  (Matt)

“I looked at ....err....the layout of the uni and I saw that the climbing centre was like 30 seconds from the uni campus and I thought right, that’s where I’m going....”  (Bonnie)

“I also chose it [HEI] purely for the fact it worked, because I could walk from Halls to here, I could walk to train station to here, there’s a shop nearby.......here it flowed really nicely.”  (Hannah)

“everything is like really close to access and everything....”  (Hilary)

“I wanted a good balance of social life and good uni life and nice area.......down here like Southampton is big....there’s a lot going on there’s always something going in.....”

“....you can go to other places to take your mind off things so it’s kinda mix of home life, uni life and doing other things”  (Terry)
HE as escapism from home:

“I was very set on getting out of Cardiff and I definitely wouldn’t have... I wouldn’t have looked at going to uni close to home.... I really wanted to go like fairly far away”  
(Noelle)

“I thought I’m getting as far away as possible..... so I picked the furthest point.....”

“...I liked the sound of Southampton..... I don’t know.... it just sounded.... it sounded exotic [laughs]....”  
(Nel)

“It was scary at the time, but it was the push I needed, and I was so ready to get away from being around home life [laughs]....”  
(Hannah)

“One of the main motivations was coming down here to uni..... I just wanted to be as far away from home as possible”  
(Lance)

“It wasn’t too far from home.... um only about 2 and a half hours drive....”  
(Debbie)

“..... um it’s not far from home, I wanted to get as far as possible but as close as possible so I could go home whenever I want....”  
(Terry)
HEI Open day influences:

“Solent kind of mirrored what my college seemed like…when I came here it was very… the uni itself wasn’t very overwhelming…felt like I could come here and not feel massively intimidated I guess… it was quite different…”

(Debbie)

“…at the open day, speaking about um socials and stuff, there were a lot of teams…”

(Grant)

“…so, I came down and spoke to Bob and he went through the course and my mum was there as well and we both really liked it and really liked the feel of the uni…we just kind of liked the atmosphere…um…just in general…everybody was really friendly…”

(Hilary)

“I knew that Solent seemed nice and friendly”

[did the open day help?] “yeah it kinda did… I remember pretty much everything we did…we did like that table top activities where we had to plan…for an event…there were injuries and we had cards…”

(Toby)

“…I think it was when they were building the Spark, so that was nice to hear that they were doing a lot of new stuff, and then the people that were showing us around were really friendly…um…and welcoming…so that was quite nice…”

(Noelle)

“……..everyone was saying good things really…”

(Kile)

HEI university image and reputation:

“I went to grammar school and they were really big on going to Russell Group universities sort of thing and I never was big on it”

“……..I’d heard lots of stuff about this university it’s basically a college]….I never cared…to me degrees a degree, it doesn’t matter where you go…”

(Gary)

“I suppose thinking about it I did have a few, maybe based on league title ratings and things like that and Solent’s maybe not the traditional red brick”

(Matt)

“…um…..this university…..maybe…..as a uni….because I’d sort of been looking at….before I’d been looking at Exeter and Nottingham to study history [laughs] which is obviously a bit of a step from there to this course but then….I…..I figured that was part of the mistake I made at A Level, I was doing something that I thought I should”

(Grant)

“Just don’t think today now, these university kind of rankings and reputation doesn’t really….it doesn’t matter unless you’re going to Oxford or Cambridge or somewhere like that, a degree is a degree, so if you have a degree under your belt that’s all that really matters…”

(Terry)

“I didn’t have a view if I’m honest….a lot of people’s parents who have gone to university….know a lot about….sort of…..there’s all this stuff about Ivy Leagues and the tables and charts and stuff…..um and I had no idea about any of that and I don’t think I was really bothered…”

(Noelle)

“I didn’t have a view if I’m honest….a lot of people’s parents who have gone to university….know a lot about….sort of…..there’s all this stuff about Ivy Leagues and the tables and charts and stuff…..um and I had no idea about any of that and I don’t think I was really bothered…”

(Noelle)

“….it’s not like I’m going to do law or something….where it’s sort of people would credit you on where you…where you’ve come from…..so I guess I wasn’t really, I wasn’t really that bothered but when my mum looked into it I think she told people that I was going to Southampton [laughs]….“

(Noelle)
Appendix N  Influence of management content

NVivo word cloud results:

Patterns from interviews:

“You can do more with it...even if you don’t go directly into the outdoor industry you still have that management to hold you up and give you.....it gives you a bit higher.......for jobs you can look at higher positions..... (Hilary)"

“...It’s the management, it’s the breadth of knowledge that comes with the course.....” (Bonnie)

“Management content within the degree”

“I think the big one was because it had the management side to it as well, it wasn’t just pure sport....” (Kile)

“...I picked it because of the outdoors but I knew management has that underpinning thing to it, where no matter where I go in life, I can be like, I’ve done a degree in management....” (Gary)

“...when you explain it that it’s more of a management course than adventure sports and it’s sort of extra to that and sort of focused in the industry but a lot of it is business management” (Grant)
Appendix O  

**NVivo illustration of theme 2 analysis**

NVivo, associated categories and levels of reoccurrence

![Employer engagement terms table](image)

**NVivo percentage of label/category content per interview transcript**

<table>
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<th>B: Example activities</th>
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Appendix P  Focus group illustrations – defining EE
(ideas blast)
Employer Engagement
Real-world
• Placement
• Guest speakers
• LinkedIn

Internships

Placement

Alumni - better talks

Linked In
Good for company
## Appendix Q  EE definitions

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<th>&quot;I think they're.....they all connect together.....not necessarily the same but they do connect and are similar in some ways.....obviously we've done elements on the course, we've done placements....and they help a whole lot because what they do....they sort of contextualise learning&quot; (Gary)</th>
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<td>&quot;...I'd say like we've had a lot of like EE with us, and particularly.....um.....with a lot of people coming in and talking to us about their company and some of them do placements with them and one of them just inform us of what they do...&quot; (Debbie)</td>
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<td>&quot;within the course perspective it's employers coming in to us and sort of showing us what they have to offer and I guess that's a big thing today.....it's not just us looking for jobs it's them looking for people&quot; (Terry)</td>
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<td><strong>Employer engagement definitions</strong></td>
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<td>&quot;....going out and talking to current employers or getting or having talks from people who already run businesses kind of in the field of study&quot; (Hilary)</td>
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<td>&quot;....if you're organising employers to come in and talk to us....partly talking about the organisations and what they are doing and partly recruitments&quot; (Toby)</td>
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<td>&quot;to me it's a few things....I guess part of it is how employers engage with you........with things like Linkedin.....I've got more connections on it.......so I guess EE goes two ways, it's how I engage with them and how they engage with me&quot; (Gary)</td>
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<td>&quot;....it's good to have people come and kind of.....telling you what they've.....what's at the end sort of thing and what you've got to look forward to I suppose (Matt)</td>
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<td>&quot;I guess that's also like in the first year we had all those talks and also in the second year we had talks about.....when businesses came in and gave us opportunities&quot; (Kile)</td>
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Appendix R  Limitations on student understanding of employability skills

“skills to get me a job .......?...I don’t know.....I don’t know why it’s taking me so long” (Ben)

“....people skills, like communication ..... teamwork ....um....maybe if you’re working in IT like computer skills....” (Terry)

“they are skills that you just pick up here that make you more desirable to companies and stuff” (Neil)

“....CV writing .... interview skills.....things like that....” (Matt)

I think the concepts are all useful um....but it’s eer, especially stuff like employability skills, that’s a massive....turns your brain off” (Toby)
Appendix S  Student perceptions on benefits of EE for macro stakeholders (industry)

“I’ve never really thought about it like that... so I suppose it’s valuable for the industry to see that the university, that the people from the university and the university is engaged with them, that they are a good source for the industry... it enables the industry to see what students are learning today and how the... which way the industry might be developing or going... so the can prepare for the future...” (Hannah)

“I think they get... um... obviously acknowledgement... say... say if you are working with like PGL it will benefit them cos” they’ve obviously got the university coming to them, it will benefit the students but also I guess a lot of them might get work experience from them and might work for them in the future... um... I think it definitely benefits both parties...” (Lara)

“... in a lot of different ways, as obviously it gives them people to work for them... um who are aspiring to go into those worlds...”

“... also I guess the aspect of them coming in and to the uni. it allows them to see the future of their worlds, if that makes sense? Cos’ we are the people that are going to be moving into their businesses...” (Gary)

“um I think that because we’ve done some academic background and understanding, that maybe we would be a great sort of tool for the company” (Ben)

“...I mean there’s definitely benefits... it’s very new to have a degree in um... outdoor management and that kind of thing” “there’s a lot of talk about graduates... and they don’t get a job... because... for various reasons... and so I think the communication between a possible employer and students is really important because in a government sense you’re... you’ve got all these educated people and they are not using their education... um... so yeah... that’s why it’s really important, like it in the benefit of everybody...” (Bonnie)
Appendix T  NVivo illustrations of theme 3 analysis

NVivo associated categories and levels of reoccurrence

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**NVivo, percentage of label/category (6/15) content per interview transcript**

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Appendix U Notes and extended findings – student reflections on wider learning experiences

Reflections on the wider HE learner journey (extended notes on findings):

“I think the way the course sets you up here in a management point of view is it gives this....this like...bank of knowledge of just underpinning....for every decision you can make as a manager.....it gives you absolutely anything you can call on....like....well I’m doing this decision because of this practice...” (Lance)

“the course gave me the confidence and the knowledge......”
“...it’s really important cos” like I said you can get a first degree but if you haven’t got any sort of knowledge of how to apply it in the real world then there’s no point” (Bonnie)

“I really like this course and it is....like, it’s helped...I tell you I wouldn’t have got my job at JB if I hadn’t started this course so it’s definitely.....even if.....my .....the academic side of it....it’s not the greatest for me....I could definitely have worked harder”
“I wouldn’t have a lot of the stuff that I’ve got going for me at the moment without it....without the course....” (Grant)

N.B. The academic element of the learner journey was influential, and this is further acknowledged by other students, who go on to note how this has developed over the course of the three years:

“I feel like my academic ability has changed, my writing has changed the way I look at things is completely different now, I feel like I was in a bit of a bubble in the first year....you know....I didn’t think things through properly, I didn’t critically analyse things the way I should have done but the effort in the first year helped with 2nd year and now I’m in the 3rd year....”

(Hannah)

“...I think the biggest thing...I mean I was looking back at some first year work recently and it’s incredible how much my like style of writing and referencing and everything like that changed in one year sort of thing....and I think a big part of that....I think was academic and employability skills”

(Matt)

N.B For some learners the combination of education and personal development were particularly meaningful, and the importance of taking responsibility. It is obvious from the following extract the level of self-reflection some learners have undergone as they come to the end of their three year journey.
It was apparent from the interviews that students recognised the positive impact that the overall HE experiences had on their development year on year, enhancing their learner trajectories, and professionally for future careers post-graduation. This included general progression in academic skills and knowledge as well as more in depth reflection on learning experiences associated to specific EE opportunities such as trips, guest speakers, placements and networking opportunities. General reflection and more specific EE examples are inextricably linked. However, for ease of analysis and presentation of findings, learner reflection on these different EE experiences are explored in detail in section 4.3.4 under real-world activities.

Despite the mostly positive discussion of the HE journey, some learners did also reflect on the difficulties and challenges of HE that they faced across the three years as these extracts show:

“first year was definitely....first year was still new and fun, I mean I was wobbling but I was fairly sure I wanted to be here, and then it came to the second year and I had a shaky start.....”
[reference to joining the army] “...that's where my focus was and that's probably why university was shaky for the first couple years, well it's always been shaky.....I'm only ant uni to bide my time and if I cruise through it I could get alright grades and it doesn't really matter because I don't need a degree but I might need it in a future life which was why I was here.....” (Toby)

“I’d say in the second year; I’d say the least focused year I’d had. I’d say that around say January to February I wasn’t that focused and we had all the deadlines and I didn’t hand in the best work......we had that poster that I didn’t do great in cos ” I left it too late and handed it in, in one night and I wasn’t really prepared” (Kile)

“came back for the second year ....I think that’s when I spoke to you and I was a bit up and down on what I wanted to do.....and I just thought, if you’re in the second year there’s no point in backing out now.......it wasn’t a good year.....I couldn’t wait for that year to end” (Terry)

“first year was a bit crazy....I mean second year I calmed down and the third year ....I haven’t really....I’m not as good as I wish......looking back I wish I could have come in more, I think that was my biggest problem not coming in.....” (Lara)

N.B. A few students discussed reservations about university life and how they had contemplated leaving, particularly in the second year. However, whilst many of the cohort acknowledged some negativity at times regarding the academic pressures and challenges across the three years, most referred to external factors and those associated with their lives outside of the course and/or university as having overriding influence.
Appendix V  Reflection on wider HE experiences and social and personal development

Extended notes on findings:

Most students brought up memories of their first few days or weeks at university and the implications relating to this. Many referred to feelings of trepidation, loneliness, awkwardness, in meeting new people and general fear of being away from home:

| Early memories                                                                 | N.B Students went on to refer to initial social interactions, whether with those they shared accommodation with: “....and there were 3 other guys who just moved in...it...it was awkward....I walked out and then...into the kitchen and we all started speaking, and then went to the pub for a drink and that was it...” (Terry), fresher activity: ‘I’d say the welcome week and freshers was sort of.....cos’ we had one week of freshers and then the welcome week......I remember going to most of it but not to all of it cos’ you get to meet everyone and make friends and then I remember some of us went out... (Kile) and course related interactions: “...I just turned up and there was this completely random group of people....it was those guys, just these random group of people and I had no idea who they were and don’t even know if they are in my lecture.......I just remember soon as I sat down in the room I was like....having doubts......” (Lance). |
| “it was a weird experience because it was the first time I’d been completely independent.... They [mum and brother]... left at .....like ....3 o’clock ....and that ....that was it then....” “I just remember sitting in my room for a couple of hours and just looking at the wall and thinking I don’t know what I’m doing....” “it was just nerves, obviously it was the first time I’d done anything remotely independent.” (Lance) | “I remember my mum dropped me off and I was sat in my room and I just sat on the bed and didn’t know what to do” (Terry) |
| “I was in halls and I phoned my.....um ...best friend’s mumnee and I was like .....everybody is in my flat and I don’t know what to do....” (Nell) | “I didn’t like Southampton.....it was miserable weather, my flat was .....it’s not we didn’t get along we were just very different people and um......I hadn’t quite, I always struggle to get into groups a lot.....um.....so I hadn’t bonded with the rest of the guys.....” (Toby) |
As indicated above, accommodation was a key factor, particularly in the first few weeks and months of the first year. However, it became a reoccurring topic for each learner, and had implications housemate relationships, both good and bad. In each example it was clear that living arrangements had a substantive impact on student life experiences:

“As...one of the things that jumped out was independence, you know...I could do whatever I want...do whatever I needed to do...I could walk into my flat with shoes on......um......so probably that was one of the highlights, having that independence, you know, getting away from parents a little...” (Hannah)

“I remember...um...so obviously we were all quite nervous at the beginning, um...I had no idea about anyone....I’d not met anyone before I even came to uni, that was here...um...got on really well with my housemates and then obviously I started getting really close with...um...a couple of girls....”

(Debbie)

“I think welcome week is really useful because a lot of like the first years come in and I definitely did and it’s a massive culture shock......you’re worrying about your washing and that kind of thing...um......and how you’re going to cook dinner.....”

(Bonnie)

This example shows the strength of good relationships with housemates and how this has a positive impact on the learner’s perspective, attitude and behaviour. This is reaffirmed by the strength of close course bonds:

“So if I was struggling on the course I could just go around Hilary and Debbie’s house or the boys house and just go...look I’m really struggling with this......you know like last night I had Debbie and Hilary around my flat and we had a massive cottage pie between us all and just sat there....it’s just this family aspect....”

(Hannah)

Other extracts show the reverse effect, and how decisions about accommodation can impact negatively on life outside of university and with related friendships:

“I thought it would be a great idea for me not to get accommodation and for me to....cos my home is not too far away, it’s only an hour and a half so I thought....you know I could kind of base myself at home.....do a bit of sofa surfing.....I was separating myself completely.....”

(Toby)
"...and I was like, this is the only way I'm going to be able to have any kind of social life...and I found it hard to tell him I was moving out...and that I was ditching "you" for these lot...um...but I think that was the best decision for me, I mean obviously we still meet up and chat..."  
(Terry)

N.B. Fall outs and conflict with housemates and course peers was a prominent feature for some students and it was clear that this could then have a ripple effect through the rest of their learner experience:

```
"...um...accommodation.......we fell out with Matt.......just it was....he just wasn't....sort of....without going into too much depth kind of thing.....he er...Jon just changed.....his priorities changed and he became....instead of being sort of friends with us cos he wanted to be friends with us.....he wanted to be friends with us because we had something to offer..."  
(Lance)
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Fall out with housemates

"......out of uni wise it wasn't good for me but that was just because my house and stuff.......because we moved in with Donna and we didn't get on......I didn't really have anyone in the house that I spoke to at the time"  
(Hilary)
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[referring to reservations on staying on the course]...... "...about living with students...um...last year was a huge factor and I think that was one of the factors why I didn't like uni in the second year.....well not that I didn't like uni...um...I didn't like living in the house that I was in cos’ it was so big.....there were 6 of us and it just didn't work out....."  
(Debbie)
```

N.B. Personal and social factors are a substantial topic running throughout the learner discussions and are explored in more detail in a separate category, but these quotes demonstrate how topics are inextricably linked across the themes. Other experiences outside of the HE learning environment were also dominant in student discussions, particularly in relation to social, club and society experiences. These were all positive accounts and indicate the importance of these associations external to the course:
These extracts relating to clubs and societies also link to the vocational nature of the specific cohort and the importance they place on having access to associated adventure and outdoor related activities.

N.B. Another reoccurring topic which underpins all themes, focuses on financial implications and this is particularly pertinent when learners reflect on their overall university experience. Half of the cohort refer to financial implications with money being a constant concern for many as this learner describes: “I had to make an extra grand in the first year um which...cos’ my....my student loan hasn’t covered anything....” (Lance)

Furthermore, the interviews revealed how it inevitably impacts on other aspects of university life and studies: “In the first year I worked the summer so I had money, second year I worked and that was pretty much my whole life and home and that was it” (Terry). Further conversations revealed the need for seeking work alongside studies and the implications of this. Pressures to work for financial reasons was regularly highlighted and sometimes this came from family influences “second year I was unemployed the whole year much to my parent’s dismay” (Gary). For some students this had a direct impact on their studies:

“I worked too much, I was doing crazy hours, crazy hours but it was just because...because I was like....I had to pay for my accommodation......and when I was finishing, everybody was buying me drinks and I’d be drinking and then coming home in god knows what hours...” (Nell)

“I’d been saving up, I didn’t work very much in the first year I just kind of enjoyed the whole uni experience thing I guess but my bank balance suffered for that so un...in the summer between first and second year I worked 3 different jobs...” (Grant)

The need to work for money and the conflicts with study was repeatedly mentioned demonstrating the difficulty some students faced in balancing these demands.
“I did it until the end of the year [job]... um... by the end of first year you remember I was at uni a lot less as that job got so much more intense as the year went on.....it paid very nicely but it was also really stressful...”

(Gary)

For some, working also brought additional positive experiences to their personal and career development which built their experiences and skills positively for future employment as this example shows:

“... um... there was definitely knowledge gained about how a massive like corporation would work in the outdoor industry... cos’ I came from a tiny climbing centre.... [Outdoor Centre] very much takes all of its new instructors under its wing and you have two weeks of training, so you know exactly what you are going to do.....”

(Bonnie)

Non-course related work was also recognised as having benefits for future careers through transferable skills:

“.....admin....like the booking systems and stuff and that kind of paperwork-y side and also hands on experience, doing like.....with customers......it’s a lot different to the actual course but it all kind of fits in together cos’ um... it’s all um the same kind of area....”

(Lara)

“If you apply yourself in the right way you can... you can sort of set yourself up nicely.....like with the job.....I think that’s helped....will help me the most as I’ve got a management role at the Quays so I’ve got some sort of management and like supervisor experiences that I have put on my CV....”

(Lance)

In summary this category indicates how the combination of life experiences, external to the course such as arriving at university, accommodation, jobs and outside clubs and societies, has a strong impact on the overall learner journey. It also magnifies the pressures that learners are under from a financial perspective and which often influence their engagement with studies. Other aspects touched on personal development, such as independence away from home, as well as the powerful influence of social interactions.
More generic reflections on social and personal development

N.B. Course and peer relationships were regularly discussed throughout the transcripts, alongside associated stories and interactions which began with initial meetings in welcome week and or related fresher’s activities. All students recalled social experiences within the first few weeks and particularly how friendships developed.

“I think it was interesting cos” like the first week....um....I met loads of people...made friends with loads of people and I didn’t speak to them after about 3 months so it was just like....a really weird thing where everyone gets thrown together and everyone is like moving around and then you find your group after that I suppose....”

“....everyone seemed to have their social group at their flat or from the course...and I think for us it was the social group on the course” (Matt)

This extract reveals how friendships developed either from halls or from the course. This reinforces previous categories that discussed life experiences and the impact that this has whilst at university. This further quote reinforces the powerful influence of halls, as well as the separate worlds of the course and accommodation:

“I was really close with a lot of....um...the people that I lived with in Halls, so I spent a lot of time with them so that sort of stands out a lot, and trying to balance course life with Halls life was quite difficult cos I tried to mix them, and it didn’t work” (Bonnie)

Many students discussed the course relationships and how this had developed. Some students referred to specific incidents in the first few days, which resulted in humorous anecdotes shared by others in the cohort:

“I was stood outside the wrong class with Toby [laughs] and Toby walked in and he sat there and I went into the other one....I realised it was the other one......and then Toby walked in 5 minutes later....I think he was in a photography class or something......something completely different... [laughs]” (Terry)

These types of memories were recalled regularly by individuals in the cohort and they all related to shared social interactions between course peers: “....they were all brilliant and I enjoyed their company and I was just very much of the class clown” (Lance). These experiences, often built on humour, were repeatedly described by students and demonstrated how initial social interactions developed into friendships:

“I guess we’re all a bit nuts....so I think we’re all....we all seemed to just bond together pretty well.....I remember the group chat for the course had been made the day before or something and I just put in it, has anyone noticed how often [lecturer] says fundamental?......and then I think others popped up yeah I was starting to clock that as well.....so that was kind of one of the first....kind of major bonding moment” (Grant)

Despite much discussion about the positive experiences and social relationships formed through the course in the first few months, some students also described some initial
conflicts that arose, and even quoted a theory that they study as part of the course to emphasise the point:

“it was probably my favourite year [first] there was the whole group....we went through....as a course....I think the reason we’re like.....a relatively close course now is because we went through the storming, norming, forming, performing thing.....that was the wrong way around [laughs]....we probably went around that 6 times in the first year” (Lance)

Another student also recalled these moments of conflict and similarly, referred to the same theory in describing how the course relationships evolved and developed towards the end of the first year and into the second:

“....I remember at the end of the first year everyone kind of clashed and fell out a little bit....and you know....part of Tuckman theory in some aspects.....and then 2nd year started, and everyone was trying....everyone was kind of getting family like again....” (Hannah)

Other social factors effecting individuals whilst progressing their learner journey, has been previously highlighted in relation to life outside of university. Here the social scene is an important aspect, with a few learners describing the pull that it had, particularly in the first year, and the subsequent negative influence on their own learning:

“I got right stuck in the whole....party scene of Southampton and ....um....and the scene....and halls ......that massively threw me....everybody’s always.....everything is.....if somebody is having a party I’m very much....I can’t focus I hear something like that.....what’s going on...is someone having fun without me, and then I’ll be like...hi everybody” (Lance)

“....first year was all party party party to be honest with you and just kind of get work in when I could [laughs]...” (Lara)

The final quote demonstrates how the course /learning element of university life became the lesser priority for some students and supports previous discussion about the power and influence of factors outside of the course and university life. Even for those that wanted to enter university and focus on their studies, the influence of the social scene and peer pressure, appeared to distract: “I just remember trying to be as independent as possible and be as professional as possible....and then it turns out that’s not what....that’s not what I wanted I just wanted to have fun so I ended up doing that” (Lance).

N.B. For some students, a personal lack of confidence and ability to communicate and interact with others made it difficult to form relationships and resulted in a minority being on the periphery:

“....I struggle to get into groups a lot....um ...so I hadn’t bonded with the rest of the guys on the course at that point ....I mean we were friends but they did their own thing and you know I sort of would jump in occasionally.......it was always a joke that they weren’t my friends they were my colleagues....” (Toby)

This perspective was echoed by a couple of others student in the cohort, with one describing how: “we just don’t click if you know what I mean” (Lara). This student then
went on to reflect how their lack of engagement with the course and learning had impacted the opportunity to establish social friendships within the cohort:

"I don’t know, I still think I wouldn’t have got on with the class anyway….but I would have tried harder….and I know I let them down with their presentations and stuff….and they are here for their degree so I wish I had done a little bit more about that….but you can’t change it now...."  

(Lara)

A couple of students emphasised similar perspectives, and by their own omission, recognising that their course peers were not close friends, and instead, reiterating the alternative social relationships formed outside of the learning environment such as through the social scene or clubs and societies:

“yeah cos although I do get on with everyone in the class…they’re not ....they’re not my mates….if that makes sense….I can’t ....I couldn’t see myself ....kind of like hanging out with them outside of uni….like we do sometimes obviously, don’t wanna be rude like that.....but I have kind of my own social group”  

(Terry)

“...then I just started going along with the team.....didn’t really know anyone at all...um....and then got to know the guys there and then they kind of became the other....my other group of really close mates”  

(Grant)

N.B. None of the students expressed unhappiness or indicated any feelings of isolation, instead they came across as comfortable in recognising that their social friendships were formed outside of the course and that they had taken the decision to pursue these as opposed to build closer links within the cohort.

Despite the minority of students that were happy to be on the periphery of course friendships, the majority still described the closeness of the cohort, with one in particular describing how the course adopted “a kind of like….wolf pack mentality” (Lance) whilst others repeatedly used the term “family” (Hannah) reaffirming the closeness of the group. It is apparent that relationships developed and evolved over the three years within the cohort, resulting in deep rooted friendships and tight bonds:

“we can’t be apart from each other and um.....I got a lot closer to Toby now over the summer into third year......but yeah.....second year me and Lance were super close.....um.....that helped a lot I think....we moved apart from other people and closer to others and out course shifted a bit, but our course has always been close which is nice cos not many people have that experience but obviously things have shifted a lot now by third year compared to where it was in the first....second year was the shifting phase so I made better friends with certain people which helped because it allowed me to be myself with other people as opposed to....you know....when you’re in a larger group you play....well I always play a smaller role in large groups anyway........I don’t like being centre of attention”  

(Gary)

This extract also demonstrates how the learner has reflected on their own personal development and decision-making as part of their social interactions, as well as acknowledging the closeness of the course and friendships within it.
### Appendix W  Impact of outdoor residential field trip

"I think from the first year one of the first things was [outdoor centre residential] and as a course we bonded and we all really enjoyed that and I think that’s when we all became really good friends…we did the team building on the first day so we call kind of bonded over it then…..I don’t know…..it just carried on from there…..” (Hilary)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Impact of first year field trip residential</th>
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"[outdoor centre residential] was really good for that friendship sort of bonding, getting to know people, and that’s when we sort of formed groups…..our little clique” (Toby)

| “…..you didn’t know them and then you went to love them for a week and it was very odd and it was sort of…..lots of…..very obviously moments where I looked at people’s personality and thought oh…..yeah…that’s your bag….that’s cool…..” (Bonnie) |

| “I’d say [outdoor centre residential ]was good because even though we all knew each other, I’d say we didn’t know each other properly….it was good because it brought everyone together” (Kile) |

"…..I believe everyone went there a bit scared, a bit vulnerable, didn’t quite know what was going on, didn’t know each other very well and by the end of it we knew each other quite well and it was kind of the beginning of that social life…..” (Hannah)
Appendix X  Summary of work placement unit and assessment

PREREQUISITES
The student must have completed a minimum 4 weeks full-time / part-time equivalent (140 hours) work experience of supervisory nature in an industry related organisation and approved as fit for purpose. This will be verified through the Academic tutor, Work Placement Officers in the [Employment Service], Unit Leader and the Programme Manager. The student placement handbook provides further clarification of work experience expectations.

UNIT DESCRIPTION
This unit will enable students to bridge the gap between academic study and vocational experience. It will allow students to reflect upon their experience of the nature of work within the context of their degree and to gain greater insights into the industry they are studying. Students will gain insight and experience through reflection that is anticipated to assist with their choice of and access to, appropriate careers.

This unit will also act as a vehicle for on-going research skills. It will develop secondary data acquisition and analysis skills acquired at level 4. Upon completion of the unit, students should have evidenced and reflected upon vocationally relevant managerial skills and knowledge. It is envisaged that by building a portfolio, students will have to critically reflect upon their work experience. This will lead to an individual piece of work, which acts as a foundation for individual work at level 6.

ASSESSMENT STRATEGY
This unit will be assessed to ensure that all learning outcomes identified are met within the unit. Students will be expected to gather a range of evidence for their presentation and portfolio. A section of the portfolio will be research based, integrating theoretical and practical aspects and thus ensuring academic underpinning to this unit. The presentation will be reflective and analytical in nature, and assess key skill areas attained during their work placement. The Portfolio will include work carried out and marked at Level 4.

If for a valid reason, any student is unable to complete their placement by the start of the second year, they will be allowed the opportunity to complete the unit throughout the level 3 academic year. In exceptional circumstances, students may be able to undertake their placement at the end of the second year and the assessment will be completed at the next available opportunity.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
On completion of this unit, students will have:

Knowledge and Understanding
1. Identified the key areas of the work related experience and recognised the relationships between organisation, customers, and employees.
2. Developed awareness of general research skills which will enable students to understand, formulate and deliver appropriate research strategies.

Cognitive Skills
3. Evaluated work carried out in their work related experience.

Practical Skills
4. Provided evidence of having completed a minimum of 4 weeks (140 hours) work placement.

Transferable and Key Skills
5. Communicated effectively to individuals and within a group environment.

AREAS OF STUDY
1. Purpose, nature and context of the experiential component
2. Job seeking skills, CV's, application forms, covering letters, interview techniques and communication skills
3. Expectations of the work placement from different perspectives
   Building a portfolio to reflect the understanding of research and applying academic underpinning to vocational study.
Appendix Y  

**Impact of placement knowledge gained**

“I did gain a lot more experience and I did gain a lot more knowledge and I feel like it would be beneficial for future students to gain that kind of knowledge so they can have a lot more experience of the field”  (Hannah)

| Gaining organisational knowledge | “I really enjoyed my placement, my first year placement, I struck gold with that I think......I’ve got more in depth experience with the wakeboarding industry and I guess outdoor water sports and stuff...”  (Grant) |

“there was definitely knowledge gained about how a massive corporation would work in the outdoor industry....so it taught me how you organise a massive group of people into doing something....um....I think it definitely gave me confidence to say that I could do it cos”  PGL very much takes all of its new instructors under its wing.....so it gave me knowledge....it gave me confidence”  (Bonnie)
## Appendix Z  Industry networking benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EE Networking benefits</th>
<th>“I tried to meet as many instructors as possible so when it got to my dissertation I could ask as many instructors as possible.” (Bonnie)</th>
<th>“because we had connections.....it’s an easy way in cos we’ve kept in contact......you could just go back into it.......” (Debbie)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“....like I’ve got contacts all around the world now” (Terry)</td>
<td>“definitely the interaction with people in the industry is very important because obviously there might be people on the course that haven’t had any experience in the industry itself so having that interaction with people who are in the industry and having a proper sit down and chat about questions is really useful as it gives people the ability to ask questions....” (Ben)</td>
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</table>
Appendix AA  Focus group feedback on placements

“placement wise I think they are very valuable”
“It enables an insight into the company and what the company offers...”
“I think the fact that the placements are sort of...almost forced in the first year is quite good...
“...yeah...it helps push relationships outside of the uni...”  (Focus group 1)

“...I think you definitely need to do a work placement”
“Yea...I was gonna agree”
“It makes the degree real”
“....Beneficial to have compulsory work experience”  (Focus group 2)
Appendix BB  
Student perspectives on the university  
Employability Service

“...I haven’t used it...I’ve got a vague sort of idea what it is...this is my extent of my procrastination...I think the main aim of the [Employability Service] is to help you decide what you wanna do and then show you all the possibilities and the resources that the university has...I just haven’t felt the need to...to engage with it...” (Nel)

Understanding the Employability Service

“These things are there [Employability Service] and I know people that have used them on our course...its those things that the uni has again......it’s not personally something I’d do......cos the future scares me [laughs]......it’s the title and I go uh......nooooo...” (Gary)

“Is it not to do with employability in the future......they’ve got loads of job prospects and stuff for the future, you can talk to them about where you’re going......I don’t think I’ve needed to [use them] at the moment, maybe until about now...[laughs]......maybe if you promoted it a bit more......like I haven’t thought of using it even though I know it’s there......so yeah......maybe if you marketed it a bit more...” (Hilary)

“I can only assume it’s kind of workshops to help you with your future...I don’t know really......maybe it’s something I should start going to...” (Terry)

“I never used them......I don’t find that support overly useful partly because I am not organised enough to think about it......the last thing I want to be thinking about now is writing a CV......” (Toby)

Non-engagement with the Employability Service

“...I’ve just seen it......I don’t know where I’ve seen it......maybe it’s an email from you saying the Careers Service......if I read it and it didn’t appeal to me then I wouldn’t do it” (Nel)

“I have received many emails that I haven’t read [laughs]...” (Terry)

“I feel like they haven’t been there from day 1 as such......if they came in......if they had their own kind of lecture like once a week or month......maybe that would be more beneficial......they are not engaging with students enough” (Hannah)
“...they support sort of...students and sort of graduates to...um...go and...live in the outside world...I did use them in the first year when I was um...trying to get a placement...I think I’ve not used them because I’m quite scared about my future so I don’t really want to talk to them just yet....” (Bonnie)

| Positive experiences with the Employability Service | “...people who help you out after uni...the [Employability Service] are really good because they provide mentors...um...in the last year and that we should all get one...I don’t think anyone has though, I don’t feel like I need one.” (Debbie) |

“I knew that the [Employability Service] was there and I knew about the [Enterprise initiative] so I googled it and found all the information...the mentorship schemes like that and I thought that was brilliant and above and beyond what I was expecting......and the other stuff of the [Employability Service] like CV checks....and skills....is great as well....I might not use that as much....” (Matt)
Appendix CC  Employability questionnaire information and sample results

2015 ESE Test results: Adventure & Outdoor Management 15 Participants, Level 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Confidence</th>
<th>Capabilities</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I believe I can achieve my career ambition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I am sure that I have what it takes to succeed in my chosen career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>I believe I can learn what I need to in order to succeed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I can usually find my own way around problems</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>When I have a setback in my job search I usually recover from it quite quickly</td>
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<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>I know people who can help me bounce back when things go wrong</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I am optimistic regarding my job search</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I am optimistic regarding my future career I'm sure things will work out well</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>I can usually find the bright side when things go wrong</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I generally set goals for myself</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I know what I'm aiming for in life</td>
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<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>I give myself a reward when I achieve one of my goals</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>I have quite a few connections who could help me with my career</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>I know how to network to people who can help me with my career</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>I have someone who works in my chosen industry</td>
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<td>51</td>
<td>I have a wide network of friends and acquaintances</td>
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<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>I have a wide range of people</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>I'm very aware of the skills I can bring to an employer</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>I can explain the value of my experience to a potential employer</td>
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<td>I could describe the work related skills I have gained during my course</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I know where to find out information about jobs that interest me</td>
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<td>I know where to find advertised job that meet my needs</td>
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<td>I know where to find advertised jobs that meet my needs</td>
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<td>I know what I want to do when I finish my degree</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>I have decided on a list of employers that I want to approach speculatively</td>
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<td>It is easy for me to choose a career I would like to follow</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I carefully select and target the employers and roles I apply for</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>I write excellent CVs cover letters and applications</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>I perform well at interviews and assessment centres</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>I know how to use email in a professional way</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>I would be happy for an employer to google me</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>I know how to use LinkedIn for professional purposes</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>I know how my chosen industry operates</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>I really understand the industry that interests me most</td>
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<td>44</td>
<td>I have the knowledge to talk about my chosen industry at interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I have some general experience of the workplace</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>I have some work experience in my chosen area of work</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>I have interacted with potential employers during my time of study</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I can explain how my skills fit my chosen career path</td>
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**AVERAGE**: 7.0
2016 ESE Test results: Adventure and Outdoor Management, 12 Participants, Level 5

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<th>Peer Networks</th>
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<th>Opportunity Awareness</th>
<th>Career Decision Making</th>
<th>CVs and applications</th>
<th>Career Digital Literacy</th>
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<td>I know people who can help me bounce back when things go wrong</td>
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<td>I know what kind of careers are open to me</td>
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AVERAGE 7.5
### 2017 ESE Test results: Adventure and Outdoor Management, Level 6, 11 Participants

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**Self-efficacy**

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**Resilience**

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**Positivity**

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**Goal Setting**

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**Professional Networks**

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**Peer Networks**

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**Self Awareness**

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**Opportunity Awareness**

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**Career Decision Making**

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**CVs and applications**

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**Career Digital Literacy**

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**Industry Knowledge**

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**Industry Experience**

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**Industry Skills**

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**Interpersonal Skills (communication)**

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**Personal skills (creativity)**

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Debbie’s results

2017

Employability Self Evaluation Survey

2016

Employability Self Evaluation Survey

2015

Employability Self Evaluation Survey
Gary’s results

2017

Employability Self Evaluation Survey

2016

Employability Self Evaluation Survey

2015

Employability Self Evaluation Survey
Noelle’s results

2017

Employability Self Evaluation Survey

2016

Employability Self Evaluation Survey

2015

Employability Self Evaluation Survey
Matt’s results

2017

2016

2015
Student feedback on the employability questionnaire

“...it’s long...[laughs]...not a particularly helpful thought...I remember it covers your...your like personality in terms of employability...I remember the graphs and it looks at what you’re good at and what you’re bad at...I haven’t really done much comparing this year because I’ve been thinking of other stuff...” (Bonnie)

“Yeah I did remember doing it but I can’t remember what I put down” (Ben)

“it was like...I don’t know a questionnaire thing and at the end of it... it did like a chart or something” (Terry)

“I remember doing it now...now you’ve mentioned it...there are lots of things available that students aren’t really aware about...” (Noelle)

ESE test feedback

“it probably hasn’t been useful to me if I haven’t looked at it [laughs]...but I feel maybe that if I had looked at it...it probably is useful” (Harly)

“...I forgot I did it 5 minutes after doing it...I didn’t engage with it at all...I don’t see much point in it. I don’t feel by clicking um buttons at a computer can tell you like...I can’t remember what’s it trying to tell me...” (Toby)

“Personally I don’t like them...I don’t really like rating my...my experiences or myself...I can’t remember what any of the questions are about...I think they’re about...um...employability or something...I don’t really like doing them...someone could rate themselves an 8 but someone could rate themselves as a 4 or 5 and still think that’s high...so it’s different people’s perspectives...I did 8 for them because there was no difference in mostly what I was doing...I think all the bars are pretty much the same...so it didn’t really show me anything...” (Debbie)

“I think it’s difficult to be self reflective when you did it on a Likert scale sort of thing...it’s difficult to kind of quantify how you feel about something and then put it onto a scale. I always find that difficult. I would find it easier to...instead of doing that...go and see an employability advisor...” (Matt)

Criticism of ESE test

“you almost know what’s coming so you fill it out to what you sort of know...you’ve got to be really humble about it I guess...I can’t remember what my scores were last time we did it...I didn’t even realise you could score...like go back at your previous scores and stuff...so no I haven’t...[laughs]...” (Grant)

“...is that the really long big survey?...how can you sit there and do 200 amount of questions it’s basically just changing the wording of some of the questions...and...or what’s beneficial...where...where do we find these results...what do you gain from these results...where do they advertise...I wouldn’t know where to find them. I would have to try and look for them...” (Hannah)

“...I think it’s a tool that can be useful very effectively and it is useful but people don’t use it...if that makes sense...like they don’t really see the benefits of it...I think it’s because it is a...it’s very long...” (Bonnie)

Positive comments on the ESE test

“It’s a very useful tool to be able to use...um...I think...I think sometimes things can be lost in regards to computer stuff...maybe a booklet...” (Ben)

“Oh yeah...it’s quite good...it kind of tells you what you need to focus on and what you’re fairly good at but then again how reliable is that cos you could just click anything” (Terry)
# Appendix EE  NVivo illustrations of theme 4 analysis

## NVivo associated categories and levels of reoccurrence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future direction (life path)</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Files</th>
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## NVivo percentage of label/category content per interview transcript

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<th>B: Finance implications</th>
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Glossary of Terms

Agency
Individual / independent decision-making by the student

Careership
Learner decision-making on career progress which is informed from interactions and experiences gained through life and education and the fields in which they are placed

Field
The environment/location (physically and symbolically) in which a learner is placed. They are not exclusive and overlap, including background/ class / family/ education / work

Habitus
A portfolio of dispositions, differing tastes, opinions, mannerisms of a learner’s behaviour, agency and closely connected with the influence of structure / field

Life-course / transitions
A learner’s journey through life, in this instance from a HE basis focusing on their 3 year undergraduate journey and the transitions they made pre-HE through to post-HE.

Non-traditional learner
Undergraduate learners on the course who are first generation and/or from working class, lower class backgrounds and/or with less traditional academic tendencies, preferring vocational, practical learning to traditional subjects. Often studying BTEC and related vocational qualifications as opposed to A Levels.

Student / learner
For the purpose of this study the term student or learner are used interchangeably and refer to individuals studying an undergraduate programme within a HEI

Structure
Formal or informal institutions including family, education and including macro level (government) through to meso (eg HEIs/schools) and micro, which have the potential to influence a learner’s agency

Vocational
Work related to a specific occupation or vocation and/or sector of employment

Wanderlust
A strong desire to travel and explore