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Lifelong Learning:
A Biographical Study of the Student Experience
in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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LIFELONG LEARNING: A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF THE
STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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This biographical study explores the experiences of adult learners who undertake
programmes of higher education. The purpose of the study was to uncover the extent
to which higher education is responding to the recent policy focus on lifelong learning
by meeting learners' needs, and what if any, changes are needed to help adults to
continue as lifelong learners. The proposition at the centre of my thesis is that the
provision of lifelong learning is problematic for higher education institutions. My
study analyses the experiences of a group of adult learners by drawing on a wide
spectrum of literature on the policy context for higher education, adult motivation and
learning processes, and previous studies of the student experience.

The study reveals that adult learners are drawn to higher education by a range of
motives, most significantly for intrinsic and personal benefits rather than in response to
economic and labour market changes. They have differing needs and expectations to
young students, and traditional notions of the nature of the student experience do not
apply. In a number of respects, the higher education experience presents difficulties for
adult learners and changes to address their needs are identified in the areas of
admissions and entry to higher education, teaching and learning, learning support, and
assessment and feedback. Recommendations to assist higher education to address the
lifelong learning agenda are made at policy and sector level and at the level of the
institution and department.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction

'Lifelong learning' is a common term in the discourse of education and training. Most UK universities claim to espouse lifelong learning goals, and rising numbers of mature student have taken up higher education (HE), constituting more that 50 percent of students for more than a decade. But it is not clear if support for lifelong learning is mere rhetoric or whether the higher education sector is becoming more responsive, accessible and adaptable to the changing needs of its student population. The purpose of my research was to explore these issues through a small scale biographical study of a group of mature students currently following degree programmes.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) already contribute to lifelong learning provision through for example, continuing professional development programmes for mature and work-based learners, but the Government has indicated an expectation that the scope should be expanded. The lifelong learning agenda and the role of HE has been set out in a series of policy papers, including the Green Paper, "The Learning Age" (DfEE, 1998) and the White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education" (DfES, 2003). Lifelong learning is seen as the solution to a range of economic and social changes which combined with the increasing global interconnectedness of societies and economies, emphasises the need for people who are adaptable and capable of continually learning (Candy, 2000). Institutions of HE, as major repositories of learning and expertise, could become the "resource centres for the learning society" (Duke, 1992:112). Thus, lifelong learning presents both an opportunity and a challenge to the HE sector, which Longworth and Davies (1996:105) have summed up as follows:

> "...the incoming tide of lifelong learning can be seen either as an opportunity for higher education to expand into the future or a reason to pull up the drawbridge lest the present be drowned."

Part of the difficulty for the HE sector in framing its response, is that there is little consensus as to what the term 'lifelong learning' actually means in practice. This has led to a proliferation of literature, some devoted to unravelling the meaning of the concept. I begin therefore, by defining the key elements of lifelong learning, prior to explaining the genesis and parameters of my thesis.

Unravelling lifelong learning

Lifelong learning can be understood to refer to post-school provision, be concerned with adults who have left formal education and training and returned at a later date, or apply to education throughout the whole lifespan from cradle to grave (Edwards *et al*, 1998:11). Knapper and Cropley (2000:28) stress that lifelong learning is not confined to adulthood otherwise it would not be lifelong. Some writers argue that the various phases within lifelong learning need to become part of one integrated system, for example Cochinaux and de Woot (1995, quoted in Coffield, 2000a:25) advocate a "lifelong learning chain" with better bridges between the various elements to mobilise the full potential of the whole. However, because most societies make extensive learning provision for children, and most people spend far more of their time as adults, it is inevitable that lifelong learning will have a major impact on learning in adult years. The concept has become part of a "trinity" of lifelong learning, the learning organisation, and the learning society, indicating the importance of continuing learning at the successive levels of the individual, the organisation, and society as a whole (Tight, 1998:254).

Smith and Spurling (1999:9-10) define lifelong learning as intended and planned learning which includes all the main types and classes of learning: vocational, formal and informal education, and self-directed learning. There may be gaps and delays, but broad momentum is maintained, and whether or not it leads to the acquisition of a formal qualification, it is 'deliberate' learning. Often, lifelong learning is presented not just as a principle or process, but as an attitude (Woodrow, 1999) whereby an

individual has lifetime openness to learning new things, taking a personal interest and a large measure of personal responsibility for successful learning. An emphasis on individual responsibility for learning and for investing in the costs of learning is found in official documents on lifelong learning in the UK (Winfield, 1998; Nicoll and Edwards, 2000). The key attributes and qualities of a lifelong learner have been identified as possession of an enquiring mind, 'helicopter vision', information literacy, a sense of personal agency, a repertoire of learning skills, and interpersonal skills and group membership (Candy, 2000).

For the purposes of this study, I use the term 'lifelong learning' to mean learning in adult years which is formal and planned. A 'lifelong learner' is an individual with a commitment to continuing to learn throughout their adult years because learning enhances their life or aspects of it such as the ability to obtain a job they enjoy.

The research problem

Higher education institutions are part of the learning infrastructure created to help individuals meet their need for lifelong learning, and I began my research with the intention of exploring the lifelong learning provision in HEIs in and around Hampshire. My interest arose because, at the time, I was responsible for education partnerships and lifelong learning initiatives at Hampshire Training and Enterprise Council. Also, I had recently moved from employment with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and was aware of frameworks for good practice in learning and teaching which I thought could be tested against lifelong learning provision. As I developed my ideas, I came to realise that such a survey would be more appropriate as a national or regional research project. At the same time, encounters with adult learners on my EdD programme and at work raised my awareness that a provider focus was only half of the picture, and that the student experience of engagement with learning is much more significant if lifelong learning is to become a reality and not mere rhetoric.

In perusing the literature, including a review conducted for the DfEE (Edwards, *et al* 1998), I identified a gap in terms of linking the concept of lifelong learning with the practical realities for students. There have been studies of adults in HE, their motivation, and the impact of continuing education on the individual (see for example, West, 1996, Lunneborg, 1997, Bourgeois *et al*, 1999; and Elliott, 1999), however the importance of accommodating adult learners has been given a new impetus by recent government policy initiatives in lifelong learning. Previous studies indicated the need for a better understanding of adults' experiences of teaching and learning in HE, and consideration of the implications of these experiences for the development of a more supportive culture.

Formal educational settings have an important role in facilitating lifelong learning in terms of requiring attendance, helping students to structure their learning programme and keep on task. But equally, it is contended that teaching methods, programmes and structures often discourage lifelong learning (Knapper and Cropley, 2000). Tutors and learning support staff, and organisational arrangements in universities and colleges can help or hinder the learning process, depending upon their capacity for responsiveness to students' learning needs. I therefore aimed to identify what needs adult students had experienced during their HE studies and what more could be done at institutional and departmental level to support them. Relevant to this theme are the teaching and learning methods used on their programme, including assessment and feedback. Aspects of support include institutional support structures such as library and information services, access to IT facilities, and support from personal tutors, learning support staff, fellow students, family and friends, and others. In general, I was looking to see if there were any implications for achieving the policy objective of increasing lifelong learning provision in HE.

Elliot's study of adult students on FE access to HE courses highlighted the importance of students' attitudes to, and motivation for, learning. He found that their reasons for taking up formal learning included a desire for improvement, self-esteem, to improve

4

job and career prospects, and the enjoyment of learning, but that they were "survivors in a system in which many do not complete" (Elliott, 1999:68). I was interested to know what the motivating factors were for individuals who had returned to learning in HE as adults, as this might indicate some factors or circumstances that are relevant to encouraging more individuals to become lifelong learners.

Thus my EdD thesis was conceived as a study of adults who are undertaking programmes of lifelong learning in HE, and the research sought to uncover the extent to which HE is felt to be responding to lifelong learning needs, and what, if any, changes are needed to help adults to continue as lifelong learners.

The research questions are:

1.   What are lifelong learners seeking from HE?

2.   To what extent is the learning experience meeting the needs of lifelong learners?

3.   What changes, if any, would help HE address individual needs for lifelong learning?

My study entailed the collection of biographical data through interviews with a group of students following HE programmes in the south Hampshire area. The data was analysed with reference to an extensive literature on adult motivation and teaching and learning processes, previous studies of the student experience, and scholarly works on the policy context in which the HE sector operates. The study was not concerned with the related issues of the employability of graduates or access and widening participation which are the subject of considerable research in their own right (see for example, CIHE, 1997; Coopers & Lybrand, 1998; HEFCE, 2001; CHERI, 2002). Race (1998) clarifies the different focus of widening participation: while it is essentially

about lifelong learning, widening participation is underpinned by the philosophy that everyone should have the opportunity for education and training at the higher levels, rather than a self-selected or wealth-selected cross-section of society. The UK Government have made considerable interventions to open access to top universities from students from poorer backgrounds (Hackett and Smith, 2003) in a policy initiative that is complimentary but also distinct to that for lifelong learning.

Autobiography

For more than 20 years, I have worked in higher education institutions or related organisations as a lecturer on vocational programmes, manager, and more recently, in quality assurance and as an accreditor for the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. My research interests developed out of my experience and I feel qualified to comment on the HE practices that I suggest should be adopted to address the needs of lifelong learners. I am myself a lifelong learner, currently completing the EdD programme at Southampton University, and have directly experienced the topic of my research. In consequence, I have a set of 'baggage' that shapes and informs my opinions and ways of interpreting findings (Anderson, 1998:134) and the research reflects my values, beliefs and perspectives.

An issue I have considered is whether to 'write myself in' to my research. There are arguments for and against this. Goodson and Sikes (2001:35) suggest that in life history, where informants' lives are revealed, it is perhaps only 'fair' that researchers' lives are too, at least in so far as they are relevant to the study. Although I have privately recorded my own responses to the questions I put to participants, I have decided not to explicitly include my opinions when discussing the themes that I identified in my data. However, I acknowledge that my voice is present among the voices of research participants that I encapsulate in my writing, and I have therefore revealed my personal background so that my potential biases can be made more explicit.

Outline of thesis

The proposition at the centre of my thesis is that the provision of 'lifelong learning' is problematic for higher education institutions. Although HE has a potentially vital contribution to make, the learning culture and academic values pose a significant challenge to the successful implementation of the Government's strategy for lifelong learning. The key ideas contained in this proposition are elaborated in Chapter Two. I begin by outlining the policy context, including political, economic and social arguments for lifelong learning, and the UK system of HE; and then review the literature on adult motivation and barriers to lifelong learning in HE, and the changes that would enable the creation of a lifelong learning university.

Chapter Three covers the research methodology including the rationale for choosing the biographical method; how the study was conducted by interviewing a group of fifteen HE students, and the subsequent process of data analysis.

In Chapters Four and Five, data extracts from the interview transcripts are used to illustrate themes that I discerned in the empirical material and selected as relevant to my research questions. Chapter Four summarises the participants' biographical data and their different motives for learning in HE. Chapter Five discusses the positive and negative aspects of HE that participants experienced, and changes that would help address their needs.

In Chapter Six, I summarise significant findings in relation to my three research questions and reflect on the implications for lifelong policy. I acknowledge that change is difficult but I argue that HEIs must expand from their traditional student base to embrace lifelong learning as their core strategy because:

> "Knowledge now grows so rapidly that the measles approach to education (get it young, get it over with) no longer works." (*THES*, 2001).

Chapter 2: The Policy Canvas

Summary

In this chapter, I review the policy context for lifelong learning and the implications for teaching and learning in HE. I begin by outlining the national and international drivers for lifelong learning. I briefly chart the European and UK Government's major policy statements including the Green Paper, "The Learning Age" (1998), and the influence of the "Fryer reports" (NAGCELL, 1997 and 1999) and of Communitarian thought on Government policy. I show the apparent consensus for a change to a lifelong learning culture in the UK based on political, economic and social arguments that principally focus on maintaining international competitiveness and promoting social inclusion. Onto this canvas I paint the UK system of HE and the changing environment in which it operates, including the development of a mass system with participation targets. I review the nature of HE provision and the factors that determine the response of HE institutions (HEIs) to external developments.

In the second part of the chapter I focus on the institutional and individual factors which impact on the achievement of a lifelong learning society. I review the literature on adult motivation and the barriers to lifelong learning in HE and draw on studies of adults that illustrate why changes are needed so that the HE experience can more readily meet their needs. I give an overview of the changes to the function and operation of HE that will help the creation of a lifelong learning university, and finally, I identify a need for research to shed light on the changing nature of the student experience of HE.

Section 1:

The policy context for the UK system of Higher Education

Rejection of the "measles approach"

The conceptualisation of education as a tool for developing individuals who will learn throughout life and thus become more valuable to society is to be found in writings dating back to the early twentieth century (Tight, 1998). The ideal of making educational opportunities available for all those who want or need them gained ground after the Second World War. A major landmark was the 1972 report of the International Commission on the Development of Education, published by UNESCO, now referred to as the "Faure Report", which recommended that educational planners should adopt "lifelong education" as the "master concept" for future educational innovation (Cropley, 1977:19). As well as lifelong education, the concept has been called recurrent education, permanent education, continuing education, and more recently, lifetime learning (see for example, DFEE, 1996) and lifelong learning. But however styled, it contains a firm rejection of the 'front-end' model (described by Boyle, 1982) and the view that education can be confined to a period of full-time study from childhood to early adulthood prior to the commencement of working life (Tight, 1991).

In recent years there have been a series of initiatives and reports at international and European-wide level concerned with lifelong learning. 1996 was designated European Year of Lifelong Learning and saw the publication of the "Delors Report" to UNESCO as well as an influential report by the OECD. The Delors Report called for the creation of a global "learning community" in which lifelong learning will be a key concept (Strain, 1998). In 2000, a European Commission Memorandum fostered debate on how the European Union could work together on a lifelong learning strategy, leading to the Communication, "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality". This emphasises the importance of four broad objectives of active citizenship, personal

fulfilment, social inclusion and employability/adaptability. International reports indicate a political consensus on the need for citizens to upgrade education and skills throughout their lives, but while many pieces of the "lifelong learning jigsaw" can be observed, no country has yet put together the complete jigsaw (OECD, 2001).

Government policy in the UK

The European agenda is broadly mirrored in recent Government policy in the UK. New Labour espouses a social democratic political ideology (Trowler, 1998; Avis, 2000) having been influenced by American Communitarian thought which advances the key notions of responsibilities as well as rights, and social justice including equality and inclusion. Prime Minister Blair advocates what has come to be known as the 'third way' with a concern for equality defined as inclusion, and 'citizenship' comprising civil and political rights in tandem with obligations as members of a society (Giddens, 1998a). Thus the Government's lifelong learning policies focus on personal responsibility and collective responsibility to meet our obligations as 'economic actors' (Etzioni, 1998).

Although there are marked differences in political ideology between the New Right and New Labour, the differences in educational ideology are less distinctive, and in many respects there was continuity in educational policy after the change of government in 1997 (Trowler, 1998). The Conservative Government's lifetime learning policy (DfEE, 1996) drew on economic, social and personal fulfilment objectives as have subsequent New Labour policies and initiatives. Both administrations have been criticised for placing too much emphasis on vocationalism (Jarvis, 1998), the needs of industry (Woodrow *et al*, 2000), and justifying policy with reference to human capital theory (which is the view that people are an investment) (Coffield, 2000b:11; Nicoll and Edwards, 2000).

Throughout most of the post-war period, there was a political consensus on the merits of gradually expanding compulsory schooling provision and leaving training to industry, and by default, responsibility for vocational education and training fell to the FE sector (Gleeson, 1990). This changed when economic recession highlighted Britain's poor economic performance relative to international competitors, and prompted Prime Minister, Callaghan, in his Ruskin speech in October 1976, to call on the education and training sector to make a greater contribution to economic performance. Subsequently, UK governments have increasingly viewed post-compulsory education in terms of its relevance for the economy and have attempted to steer it in a vocational direction (Edwards *et al*, 1993; Gleeson, 1996; Trowler, 1998).

On its election in May 1997, the New Labour Government promised that education would be its main priority; it was the key to Britain's future according to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning was established and the "Fryer Report" (NAGCELL, 1997) made a clear case for a lifelong learning culture in the UK as well as identifying current obstacles including insufficient childcare, and guidance and counselling for learners. The contribution of HE was seen as vital, and the second report (NAGCELL, 1999) advised that to secure a change in culture, HEIs (in common with other providers of learning) would need to modify their structures and procedures, language, curricula, learning environment, teaching methods, and systems of learner support. A vision of HE sustaining a learning society also informed the "Dearing Report" (NCIHE, 1997) which proposed a qualifications' framework incorporating credit accumulation to enable learners to transfer credits earned between institutions.

Around this time, there were a number of other reports on the state of learning in the UK. These included the "Kennedy Report" (FEFC, 1997) on widening participation in the FE sector; the MORI report (1998) and National Adult Learning Survey 1997 (DfEE, 1998d) on attitudes to learning amongst adults; and the NIACE report on the deep "Learning Divide" (Sargant, 1998) between sections of society. Each listed a similar set of under-participating groups in society for targeting and identified

11

strategies for action, including endorsement of the idea of lifelong learning (Tight, 1998). It was in this context that the Government published the Green Paper, "The Learning Age" (DfEE, 1998a) with proposals to expand further and higher education, create a University for Industry, set up individual learning accounts to encourage people to save to learn, and other measures to widen participation of under-represented groups in education. Subsequent papers and publications on specific issues gave shape to these proposals.

The White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education" (DfES, 2003:10) points to the vital contribution that HE makes to the economic and social well-being of the nation. It indicates plans to expand HE provision (although with a focus on two-year, work-related foundation degrees rather than the traditional three years honours degree). The White Paper asserts that education including HE can no longer be confined to the early years of life and reiterates the Government's championship of lifelong learning:

> "This is truly an era of lifelong learning. Today's generation of students will need to return to learning – full-time or part-time – on more than one occasion across their lifetime in order to refresh their knowledge, upgrade their skills and sustain their employability."(DfES, 2003:16)

In the next section, I explain why lifelong learning is often part of the response to change and the "prevailing orthodoxy" (OECD, 2000:19) that informs government initiatives.

The gathering storm

The concept of lifelong learning has become ubiquitous in education policy and theory, enshrined in law, and is the "favoured doctrine of think tanks and opinion makers" (Murphy, 2000:166) as the solution to a range of economic and social problems. The arguments for lifelong learning and the role of HE within that derive from two

theoretical positions. Firstly, lifelong learning is needed to sustain a competitive, prosperous economy; and secondly, it is needed to foster and develop a democratic, informed and participative society (see Williams, 1977; Longworth and Davies, 1996; Watson and Taylor, 1998; Smith and Spurling, 1999). There is a considerable literature advancing these arguments and here it is possible to give only a flavour.

It is widely accepted that major changes have occurred on a global scale in the latter half of the twentieth century and the "globalisation thesis" is advanced by many who advocate lifelong learning (see Ashton and Green, 1996; Murphy, 2000; and OECD, 2000). The rise of multinational corporations (MNCs) and globalisation of international finance has produced a situation where nation states are less able to decide their economic and social policy (Hodgson and Spours, 1999). Taking advantage of more open trading conditions, MNCs have relocated much manufacturing to low-cost locations in Pacific Rim countries (Longworth and Davies, 1996). Also, if a country does not have a sufficiently skilled workforce, a MNC can use new information and communications technology to draw on expertise from all over the world. New technologies, by their very nature, demand a quick turnover in skills and employees who are willing to constantly update their skills and change jobs several times in a lifetime.

A transformation has been taking place in the nature of work, with a shift from manual labour to information and knowledge work, such that contemporary society is labelled as the 'knowledge society' (Ashton and Green, op cit). In OECD countries, it is estimated that by 2010 there will be a potentially unsatisfied demand for highly skilled, professional, technical, administrative and managerial staff (OECD, 2000). At the same time, the structure of employment is being transformed and employees can no longer expect to have a job for life (Merrill, 1997; Bayliss, 1998). To stay in employment and have "employability", individuals need the ability to gain new knowledge and skills to quickly adapt to the needs of the marketplace (CBI, 1998; DfEE, 1998b). In this context, Coffield (1999) argues that lifelong learning is being

used to socialise workers to the escalating demands of employers who use "employability" and "flexibility" to cover a variety of strategies to reduce costs but also increase job insecurity. Similarly, Murphy (2000:175) states that lifelong learning is a manifestation of the industrialisation of education under the guise of an empowering and progressive education for all.

However, there are powerful economic arguments for lifelong learning; with the "two revolutions" in technology and information affecting ordinary life, people are faced with continuous change, which requires continuous learning. A further problem for western countries is the 'demographic time bomb': western countries are experiencing a massive fall in their birth rates and the working population is aging rapidly. Europe is competing with countries with a much younger workforce. In consequence, it is seen as vital that the reduced proportions of younger people are as well educated and trained as possible (OECD, 2000) and older people receive updating and training to upgrade their competence. HE has an important role in helping societies cope with the effects of demographic change, not only by increasing provision for mature students but also by developing competencies for lifelong learning among traditional students entering directly from school.

The widespread social change that the UK is experiencing has been defined as the emergence of the 'risk society' (see Beck, 1998, and Giddens, 1998b) and there has been a reawakening of concern with social cohesion and inclusion (Erben, 2000). There are fears that social exclusion will worsen as economic forces impact on those who live on the margins of society and often dependent on the welfare state (Smith and Spurling, 1999). There is also a wider argument based on notions of equity: that all strata of society should have full opportunity to realize their potential and have equal access to social, economic and political advantages (Cropley, 1977). Lifelong learning is advocated to meet the educational needs of groups in society who have been placed at a disadvantage by traditional education (see for example, Raggatt et al, 1996). These groups include people of low socio-economic status, the disabled, rural dwellers,

and women who experienced difficulty in learning effectively during childhood, or were prematurely forced out of the educational system by the need to work and help support a family.

Lifelong learning is positioned as a reasoned response to the processes of change that I have outlined above, enabling individuals to develop skills and confidence to navigate the risks and uncertainties of contemporary life. However, some writers argue that the evidence that lifelong learning can play a role in achieving the goals of personal fulfilment, social inclusion and economic competitiveness is less than clear (see Keep, cited in Avis 2000; Coffield, 2000a; Edwards and Nicoll, 2001; Kingston, 2001). Far from being a vehicle to inculcate the values of 'active citizenship' (that is, committed membership and participation in society), Martin (1999), indicates that the discourses which inform the current agenda for lifelong learning, remain narrowly conceived and highly reductionist. An outspoken critic of government policy, Frank Coffield (1999), has said:

> "There is a powerful consensus among politicians of all parties that lifelong learning is a wonder drug which, on its own, will solve a wide range of education and social ills. But this consensus is dangerous, deficient and diversionary."

In the next section, I give an overview of the system of HE in the UK and expand on the influence of Government policy on the nature of provision.

Higher Education provision in the UK

Universities have existed since mediaeval times, but the historical developments that produced the modern UK system of HE are strongly linked to economic forces and the need for an educated workforce (see Tight, 1991; Trowler, 1998). The period since the Second World War has been characterised by the continued growth of post-compulsory

education, and governments have increasingly become involved in HE policy. Significantly, in the 1960s, there was the establishment of the binary system of university and polytechnic education, and mandatory maintenance grants were made available to full-time first degree students. The polytechnics were intended to develop links with industry and the community and to maintain part-time provision. However, part-time HE never enjoyed the level of resourcing given to full-time provision and the polytechnics frequently sought to mimic the practices of the universities, leading to the process termed 'academic drift' (Tight, 1991).

The "Robbins Report" (Committee for Education, 1963) set out a model of HE with a number of purposes; personal development, social cohesion, and learning for its own sake. However, by the early 1980s, according to Williams (1997:8), a number of reports (see for example, the Leverhulme Studies, SRHE, 1983) showed HE as primarily excluding and dividing rather than including and integrating large numbers of people, in particular working class and ethnic minority groups. Pressure for HE to promote social cohesion rose up the policy agenda, as well as to produce the manpower required by a technologically-based economy (see for example, Fulton, 1981; and Ball, 1984). There was a rapid if largely unplanned expansion of HE, and in 1989 the number of mature student entrants to HE constituted more than 50 percent of all entrants to HE for the first time (though not in all institutions) (McNair, 1998). [Mature students are defined as over 21 on entry to undergraduate, and over 25 on entry to postgraduate programmes (DfE, 1992).]

The current system was established by the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. This abolished the binary system, permitted the polytechnics to award their own degrees and adopt university titles, and established a common funding structure for HE. Differences have survived to some extent between the 'old' and the 'new' universities: the 'new' universities have been more open to non-traditional adult students in terms of institutional provision and have had a higher participation rate of such students (Bourgeois et al, 1999). Meanwhile the further education (FE) sector has grown since the 1980s to become a significant alternative entry route into HE for

16

non-traditional students. It provides Access courses for adult students wanting to enter HE, and HE courses such as 2 + 2 degrees or franchised courses through agreements with universities.

Universities have traditionally been elite institutions (Scott, 1984; Duke, 1992) but HE has been transformed from an elite to a mass system over recent years. In 1962, only around 6 percent of those under 21 participated in HE, but over the last quarter-century, participation has tripled, and around 43 per cent of those aged between 18 and 30 entered HE in England in 2001-02 (DfES, 2003:12). In student numbers, 368,115 applicants were accepted onto full-time undergraduate courses in autumn 2002, 10,074 (2.7 per cent) more than in autumn 2001. The rise in numbers varied with age group: 8.7 per cent for mature students aged between 21 and 24; 4.3 per cent for students over 25; and only 1.8 percent for students under 21 (Goddard, 2003).

The majority of mature students in HE are on part-time courses and they have been called "the invisible majority" (McNair, 1998). The mature student population has been found to be more diverse in its socio-economic and educational profile than the traditional 18-21 student group. Fuller (cited by Hodgson, 2000) indicates that older students are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to have a lower terminal age of initial education and not to possess conventional HE qualifications (A levels). The growth in the numbers of students participating in part-time courses is indicative of the appeal of combining a return to study with domestic and/or employment commitments (Hodgson, ibid:163).

The Government's target is to raise the participation rate for the 18 to 30 age group to 50 per cent by 2010. It is estimated that this will require the sector to recruit around 28,000 more students each year, and on past performance, twice as many part-time to full-time students to meet the target. Within the targets, the focus is on increasing opportunities for students in social classes 4 and 5, reflecting the Government's position that HE should be more inclusive and accessible, and a force for social justice and equity. It is interesting to note that the Government has not set any targets that

would be appropriate to an ageing society, for example, numbers and proportion of students over 45 taking up undergraduate places in all subject areas (Layer, 2000). Schuller and Field (1999) question whether the concentration on young people is promoting fairer life chances and suggest that this policy absorbs resources that could be used to weave lifelong learning more closely into the fabric of society.

In recent years therefore, British HEIs have grown from small often distinctive institutions with quite small student numbers by contemporary standards, to become part of an HE system with component institutions collectively managed or steered to meet what are seen as the nation's needs. Bourgeois (op cit:13-14) describes a changing environment which places new expectations upon HEIs and promises continuously to redefine their character and role. Institutions do however seek to retain a distinct identity and image and there is diversity of mission across the sector with various emphases on research, knowledge transfer, social exclusion, lifelong learning, and regional economic development, although it is recognised institutions cannot sustain all these activities equally (DfES, 2003).

The sector's diversity is apparent in statistics on the mix of the student population. Students in 'old' universities are still overwhelmingly 18 to 21-year-olds and most adults are found in 'new' universities. Ramsden's research, 'Patterns of Higher Education Institutions in the UK' (cited by Baty, 2001) shows there are no 'old' universities among the ten institutions with the highest proportion of full-time mature students (an average of 45 per cent). Thus, adults on full-time programmes mostly have to learn in a minority situation alongside younger students; if they are part-time there is more likelihood of being taught in an adult group. Where university structures and facilities remain largely oriented to younger students, there are likely to be difficulties for mature students.

While many HEIs are well experienced with the problems of teaching in-service teachers and mature students on postgraduate and certificated courses, lifelong learners are a less homogeneous group. They will include upwardly mobile MBA students,

engineers and technicians in fast-changing fields, executives looking for a new career, women re-entering the job market after raising children, and people displaced by new technologies and by company downsizing (Longworth and Davies, 1996). The "Fryer Report" (NAGCELL, 1997) has identified that such new kinds of student with different backgrounds and educational biographies will require new and often additional forms of support - financial, organisational, educational, and emotional. In the next section, I explore the literature relating to adult students learning in HE, including why adults are drawn to learning, the barriers that can hinder them, and the changes that have been suggested to make HE more accommodating to mature students.

Section 2: Adult students learning in higher education

Motivation for learning

A review of the literature shows that studies of motivation for learning have mainly focused on the experiences of children at school, and there is limited understanding of adult learning strategies and the motivational issues behind them (see Lea and West, 1995; Smith and Spurling, 2001). While many theories have been advanced by education researchers and psychologists to explain motivation for learning, there is no unifying theory, or even agreed principles, largely because many types of factors can affect student motivation for good or ill (OECD, 2000:27). These include social, psychological and economic factors; physical and cultural factors which can be influential in certain contexts; and educational factors including the policies and practices of learning institutions and those who work in them.

The dominant tradition in the United States where most research into adult motivation has been conducted, conceptualises motivation as a *psychological* phenomenon. There are four main groups of theories. Life cycle theory proposes that needs emerge at

chronological stages in human development with for example, creative, artistic and 'feminine' aspects of self being released in middle age. The hierarchy of needs theory suggests that needs for self-esteem, achievement and confidence are triggered once lower order needs are met. Decision-making theory and differences in personality traits are also used to explain different motivational orientations. However, West (1996:6) cautions that these psychological interpretations and the cultural values implicit within them may reflect "the hegemony of white, male middle-class experience and discourse within the literature of learning and development".

A *sociological* perspective emphasises the influence of the social environment on learning motivation, and a strong theme is that adults are drawn to education in the current conditions of uncertainty and change in order to reconstitute themselves (Courtney, 1992). Giddens (1991) identifies that paradoxically, the culture of late modernity precipitates both crises and opportunities. He describes the 'reflexive project of self', which consists of sustaining a coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative, as a survival imperative. In the same vein, West (1996:10) observes that:

> "HE is potentially a space in which to manage and transcend feelings of marginalisation, meaninglessness and inauthenticity in interaction with others; in which it is possible, given their support and encouragement, to compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self."

This emancipatory view of HE was derived from research among thirty adult learners who were living in areas of Kent where there was major economic and social dislocation with resultant social exclusion and personal despair, and therefore it may not be applicable to all adult learners. However, West's research, in common with Courtney (1992), identifies the important role of 'significant others' and supportive relationships in encouraging learning and educational participation. Family members and peer groups have a potentially strong motivational influence through providing

information, incentives, role models, encouragement and chivvying. Families and groups can foster a positive narrative regarding learning and if the individual identifies strongly with them, this will have a powerful effect on learning motivation. However, this works both ways, influence may not always be for the good, and individuals may not always feel able to ask for, or accept, help and advice (Smith and Spurling, 2001).

Adults who have been away from education often enter university because they actively want to change their lives, and also to prove to themselves they are capable of studying at this level. For some, initial schooling was a negative experience because they were failed by a system based on class inequalities (O'Shea and Corrigan, 1979). For others, school was an enjoyable experience but they were unable to reach their potential perhaps because class and gender expectations denied them the opportunity to stay on and complete their education (Deem, 1978). A study of the attitudes of mature undergraduates at the University of Warwick showed that they perceived the opportunity to return to learn and study for a degree as 'completing their education' (Merrill, 1997). Thus, their attitudes were shaped by the traditional 'front-end' model rather than the lifelong view of education. However, after immersion in the learning process and as their degree studies neared completion, attitudes changed and several contemplated continuing with postgraduate degrees or professional studies.

According to Silver and Silver (1997), the small amount of research which has been done in a number of countries suggests a degree of constancy across types of institutions and time in students' reasons for applying for HE: vocational goals and occupational expectations are relevant to all students in HE. Government and employers appear to have a strong influence on individual motivation for learning, and adults are constantly exhorted to acquire new skills or update old ones for the benefit of the economy as a whole, their job security or career prospects (CBI, 1998; DfEE, 1998b; DfES, 2003). West (1996) observes that research on why adults take up award bearing HE appears to confirm the primacy of vocational motives to gain a better job, enhance occupational performance and/or position in the labour market. However,

along with Lunneborg (1997), she expresses a note of caution about interpreting people's motives; if education is primarily marketed for instrumentalist occupational ends, then learners may mirror these rationalisations in their explanations, especially those learners who feel diffident and uncertain about what they are doing and why. Individuals may not know why they act as they do; their reasons for educational participation may be difficult to articulate, and the more personal parts of their story may be repressed.

It is likely that most learners will have a range of motives for HE. The interviewees in Lunneborg's study (ibid) of adult males completing Open University degrees expressed multiple and overlapping reasons for doing a degree. While there were often employment reasons, earlier failure, recommendation and encouragement from others, and the pleasure of study were equally likely to be stated. Research with adults by West (1996), Tobias (1998), and Elliott (1999) shows that education is not a simple linear progression, and that learners experience fragmented and differentiated lives that do not fall into neat ideal types or dimensions. There are various classifications that illuminate the characteristics of learners and their motivation (see, for example, McNair, 1993; MORI, 1998). West and Hore (1989) developed a typology based on scholastic careers with 'recyclers' defined as those who have already gained a degree and 'deferrers' being those who left school with HE entry qualifications. The three categories put forward by Smith and Spurling (2001) are particularly useful in my study as they relate to adult learners in mid-life and their needs of the education system:

Updaters
Their motivation is primarily economic and there are two types, *crisis learners* who are reacting to a life crisis and need an appropriate qualification and curriculum response that gives tangible quick benefits; and *pre-emptors* who are trying to avoid a crisis, maybe by seeking to change occupation, and thus have more time in which to update themselves.

Self-developers

See learning as an end in itself, rather than in instrumental terms and may want to upgrade skills to improve their quality of work experience, or for social or domestic purposes. They may want to learn on their own or take part in groups with similar interests, and providers need to unravel the various strands of motivation and provide suitable learning opportunities.

Returners

Take up formal learning after a long time away during which their skills and confidence may have waned. Accreditation of prior learning (APL) has a large potential to motivate such learners by recognising that they have valued implicit and explicit knowledge, and Access courses help avoid lengthy procedures for university entry.

Barriers to learning

The previous section has discussed why adults might be drawn to HE. Research has also identified three types of barriers that hinder adults from getting into HE: their attitudes, circumstances, and the nature of education provision. Attitudes include the way an individual perceives the education system and the possibility of being a student. As Rees and colleagues in Coffield (2000b) have indicated, many adults are actively inhibited from taking part in lifelong activities by unhappy experiences or 'failure' at school. But even people who have pleasant memories of school may have failed to acquire skills and attitudes that are conducive to lifelong learning. Rees (ibid) states that deep-seated attitudes towards learning in formal settings, which he calls 'learner identities', are predominantly formed early in life through the influences of family and the experiences of compulsory schooling.

Circumstantial barriers include family situation, occupation, place of birth and residence, while educational barriers include the content and characteristics of provision, and the features which are unresponsive to potential learners, such as the scheduling arrangements. Common obstacles that individuals identify and own up to are the costs of study and lack of time because of other commitments (Rees, ibid). Barriers vary from case to case, with women often concerned with fitting in study with childcare and family duties, while people in work are concerned with time management. In Lunneborg's study (1997), obstacles were most often related to fitting in study with work, family and social life but two participants reported hiding what they were doing from others. In one case employers were hostile and in another, work colleagues would have seen HE as "getting above your station".

Barriers of cost and time may be more commonly mentioned because they are more socially acceptable than other factors such as lack of interest and low self-confidence. For example, MORI (1998) found that the perceived emphasis placed on obtaining qualifications is a barrier to involvement in learning for 37 per cent of adults. Bourgeois (op cit:95) identifies attitudinal barriers that are hidden behind would-be learners' discourses. A major obstacle is the opinion that HE is not for them, but for young people only. This feeling is probably stronger for less qualified people with no prior experience of HE, but such an attitude makes it difficult for policy-makers and HE programme managers to reach non-traditional targets and to attract second-chance students. However, even if governments, communities and employers are able to minimise the obstacles preventing people from returning to education in adult life, research indicates that around one in five adults will remain outside the net. Lack of motivation may be the greatest barrier of all (Gorard, 1998:30) and reducing the number of people who have no ambition to become learners will entail culture change - over at least a couple of decades (OECD, 2000; Smith and Spurling, 2001).

Adult learning processes

Many authors argue that adult learning processes differ from those of children and adolescents (see Knox, 1974; Cross, 1981; Brookfield, 1986; and Rogers, 1996). Knowles (1984) has been particularly influential in challenging assumptions about learning by putting forward the theory of 'andragogy' to distinguish the principles for fostering learning in adults from pedagogy, the principles for teaching children. The four assumptions of andragogy are that adults show a tendency to self-directedness as they mature; their experiences provide a resource for learning; they are motivated to learn by real-life tasks or problems; and look to apply new learning in their immediate circumstances. These ideas have been subject to debate as there are many schools of thought on learning. Indeed, Kidd (1973) has compared the search for a general theory of adult learning to the search for Eldorado.

Accepting that learning activities and learning styles vary considerable with physiology, personality and culture, theorists have attempted to identify general characteristics of adult learners in order to aid practice. Since adults generally possess practical, social and occupational experience, new learning is interpreted in relation to earlier experience (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1990), and requires much more psychological 'work' for adults than for children. Thus the teaching of adults should emphasise experiential learning and self-directed learning, and incorporate forms of learning that are problem-based, peer-assisted, and promote critical self-awareness and reflection on learnt material (Candy, Crebert and O'Leary, 1994). Freire (1973, cited in Brookfield, 1986) has advanced the notion of 'praxis' to describe the process of exploration, action and reflection that he felt was central to adult learning.

Many HEIs have incorporated elements of self-directed learning and the 'adult mode of learning' into their curriculum, for example, the use of learning contracts and individualized curricula, peer learning networks, and have provided accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). However, it should be noted that learners are at

different stages of readiness for self-directed learning and to be effective, the educational process needs to coincide with this process of maturation (Rogers, 1996). Some adults, re-entering education will expect to be taught, and if these expectations are not met in some way or other, learning will be hindered. Brookfield (op cit) indicates that they may resent what they see as the teacher's abdication of their leadership role; they may experience anxiety in their orientation to learning, possibly from recalling school experiences; or they may have acquired preferred learning styles. Also, some cultures do not encourage the development of autonomy, for example of women, especially married women. The implication of the wide range of learning styles that exist within any group of adults is that teachers need to devise learning methods that give scope for all participants to exercise their own particular way of learning (Rogers, op cit).

A further characteristic of adult learners is that they have multiple roles and responsibilities, and this results in a different orientation to learning from younger students according to Smith (1983). Practically, this means that they will wish to make good educational use of the finite time they invest in education. They often have a need for much greater flexibility in the times and locations at which instruction is offered, and may want to drop in and out of courses in a way that is incompatible with an orderly, concentrated and lock-step curriculum (Knapper and Cropley, 2000).

Academic tribes

The nature of education provision has been identified above as a potential barrier for adults seeking to take up HE, and this includes the attitudes and perceptions that some academics have of adult students. A complicating factor is that HEIs are not homogeneous organisations with a uniform response to adult students across all departments. In this section I draw on research regarding organisational culture and values to show why within and across HEIs there are varied responses to lifelong learning policy initiatives.

The cultures of HEIs have been described by authors such as Mintzberg (1983) as a 'professional bureaucracy' (although they have additional specific characteristics that distinguish them from other bureaucracies). Bourgeois (op cit) describes HEIs as having multiple, ambiguous and highly contested goals because the goals may differ in meaning and priority between top management and the administration and academic departments. Conflicts over goals may also occur among academics themselves as individuals or sub-groups pursue their own professional goals. Becher (1989) has described these differences as 'academic tribes'; academic staff have professional and disciplinary affiliations and memberships on a national and international basis, and they tend to identify firstly with their profession and their peers, and only secondly with their employing institution. Within institutions, external funding pressures have impacted on some departments more than others and further internal diversification of institutional goals has increased the potential for internal conflict between academic professionals and senior management. In this context, there can be significant differences between senior management and departments across an HEI regarding policy initiatives such as increasing adult participation and lifelong learning. Also, because policies formulated by central government and within educational institutions have to be implemented by individuals and groups in institutions, their values, attitudes and perceptions in effect, change policy. As Trowler (1998) has observed, policy as it is interpreted and put into practice becomes "refracted".

The impact of difference between disciplines and departments and of the behaviour and attitudes of admissions tutors and lecturers has been identified in research conducted in four departments at the University of Warwick (see Bourgeois *et al*, 1999). Admission tutors, acting as gatekeepers, were found to play a powerful personal role within the framework of institutional and national policy, in deciding whether or not to admit mature students. The departments of Sociology, Arts Education, and Law took a positive view of the varied life-experiences that adults bring to a degree course. However, the perspectives on mature students were different

in Biological Sciences; here the consensus was that the sciences are not suitable for adults as scientific knowledge moves at a rapid pace, although the lecturers did not consider it a problem for adults to study non-science disciplines. The high academic reputation of the department rested on teaching high-flying young students with good 'A'-level grades. In consequence, the adult students admitted tended to be in their early twenties.

Williams (1997) has identified a typology of five educational positions regarding the policy to promote greater access to HE, and this can help with understanding differing academic attitudes to lifelong learning. 'Academic traditionalists' such as the biologists above, place enormous emphasis on 'A' level points scores and have concerns that admitting mature students or those without normal minimum entry qualifications might lead to a lowering of standards. 'Marketeers' favour competition and differentiation via the market, and in targeting particular consumers, may take 'rational' decisions that mature students need more support and are therefore less cost-effective. 'Utilitarian trainers' link national economic success with the production of highly skilled graduates; this paradigm is generally supportive of lifelong learning where it has a vocational orientation. The discourse of 'liberal meritocrats' is manifest in the Robbins Report and emphasises personal development and equality of opportunity. Various practices such as semesterization, modularity and credit-based assessment /certification systems are advocated as they improve individual choice and increase the flexibility of learning suited to individual needs. The 'access movement' is the fifth position that Williams identifies. It is concerned with groups historically excluded from HE, and campaigns for alternative provision responsive to adult needs and aspirations, but also highlights the problems and difficulties in combining maturity with studenthood, which may necessitate special provision. Variations of these five positions are likely to be held by the academics with whom adult students come into contact, and mature students quickly perceive which HEIs are welcoming to adults by their experience of the admissions procedure and other contacts with staff.

Creating a lifelong university

Many HEIs espouse mission statements that indicate a commitment to providing lifelong learning but they face considerable challenges in making this a reality. Knapper and Cropley (2000:190) summarise the difficulties that confront HE institutions:

> "Organizations are inherently passive, tending towards bureaucracy and ritualism, and the goals and support mechanisms for higher education are basically conservative. The socialization of higher education staff is extensive and effective, and academics have great latitude in their work activities. In addition, the processes of university governance can often be an obstacle to change."

By definition, universities should be "learning organisations" [1]but in the context of a rapidly changing environment with a downward driving of the unit of resource, they are more likely to become defensive and overly bureaucratic which is inhibiting to organization learning (Tann, 1995). According to Carl Rogers (cited by Smith and Spurling, 1999:58), effective teaching depends on conviction and passion, but if teachers are distracted by bureaucratic and organisational requirements and are lacking in higher-level support, they will not come over as convinced or convincing learners. Also, too few HEIs focus on the learner and empower their staff and students (Duke, 1992). Longworth and Davies (1996) have identified three significant changes that HEIs need to make in order to become learning organisations. Firstly, individuals need to have involvement in and have a sense of responsibility for decisions in their institutions. However a recent AUT poll showed that academics feel alienated from the decision-making process (Baty, 2003). Secondly, the emphasis in curricula should be on learning how to learn rather than on teaching. Thirdly, staff development and

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[1] Pedlar, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991) have identified the characteristics of learning organisations including a learning approach to strategy, participative policy-making, internal exchange, a learning climate and self-development opportunities for all.

induction programmes should be provided to help staff prepare for change including how to be facilitators of learning (for an explanation of the role of facilitators, see Brookfield, 1986).

A content-dominated curriculum that is assessed mainly by the exercise of memory skills is obsolete in 'the world of the information explosion' according to Longworth and Davies (op cit). Instead broader degrees are required with generic rather than specific skills and knowledge, producing graduates who are able to learn continuously and apply their learning in a range of contexts (McNair, 1998; Smith and Spurling, op cit). To equip graduates with such abilities, learning skills would have to be explicitly taught as part of the curriculum (Smith, 1983; Hodgkinson, 1998; Candy, 2000). Learning approaches that provide a foundation for lifelong learning encourage personal reflection, use of personal development plans, real world problem-solving, and evaluation of achievement of personal growth targets (Knapper and Cropley, 2000)

The stories collected by West (1996) suggest that the HE curriculum and its pedagogy needs to be created more in dialogue with learners, and shaped by their needs, wants, and experiences rather than remaining more or less the same as that delivered to eighteen-year-olds who come straight from school. Much teaching in HE relies on formal lectures and seminars, and much student learning is of a passive nature. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, pedagogical arrangements appropriate to adult learners include small group co-operative learning, experiential learning, and peer learning.

Change in teaching and learning methods is made difficult when they have been in use for many years and a key factor in achieving change is the attitudes and abilities of staff. Of major importance is the institutional reward system, which in many institutions is weighted in favour of scholarship and research, rather than teaching and learning. Other institutional policies which impact upon the provision of lifelong opportunities include the formal framework of timetables between 9 am and 5 pm on

weekdays, and access to learning support such as library provision in the evenings and weekends. Admissions policies and procedures have been shown (above) to be a significant obstacle to opening up HE to adults. Also, examination systems switch off many people from learning, so more flexible assessment strategies which give information and stimulus, and celebrate achievement are needed.

A lifelong learning approach requires cooperation among the different elements of the education system, such as between HE and FE, and recognition of the role of the workplace. Partnerships with industry are encouraged by government policy (see DfES, 2003), which envisages HE taking a key role in continuing education and updating of employees. However, HEIs find that working with industry brings a particular set of challenges. Industrial organisations generally demand the provision of high quality support materials and structures, and increasingly look for more cost-effective presentation techniques such as open and distance learning. Customisation of programmes and responsiveness to 'just-in-time needs' for learning is seen as the future by Smith and Spurling (op cit) rather than the current inflexible provision which obliges learners to wait for the start of the academic year to begin courses. Start dates throughout the year and scheduling that bunches courses together in ways that make them more accessible to adults with work or other commitments were advocated by the "Fryer Report" (NAGCELL, 1997).

Schuller and Bostyn (in Raggatt, 1996) draw attention to the further challenge of the fourteen million adults in the UK aged over 50, falling within the definition of the 'third age' and with learning needs largely associated with life after work. HEIs committed to providing lifelong learning opportunities will need to consider how far they will make separate provision for older learners. Relevant considerations include outreach activities to reach groups who are not in 'the learning habit', information and guidance, admissions policies, scheduling and location of provision, learning environments, curriculum and staff development.

The changing nature of the student experience

Little qualitative research has been done to investigate the experiences, interests and perspectives on learning and education of adults with limited experience of formal post-compulsory education, nor of the biographical processes that structure their learning patterns (Tobias, 1998:122). In the UK, research has largely been concerned with quantitative studies of participation for example, the government-sponsored National Adult Learning Survey (DfEE, 1998d), which entailed use of a structured questionnaire to interview over 5,000 adults to identify key characteristics and attitudes of learners. Within the field of HE, research projects on mature students have tended to be concerned with numerical trends and academic attainment. According to Silver and Silver (1997) this is because of the strong influence on research of public policy and of HEIs own internal pressures to attract, keep and improve the academic performance of their students for accountability and funding reasons.

Haselgrove (1994) indicated that HE providers are predominantly interested in only a segment of students' experience – their role as learners – and in consequence make strategic decisions which take little account of the rest of students' lives. This contrasts with the USA where more attention has been given to the 'whole person', for example, by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, cited by Haselgrove). An exception in the UK is the University of Central England in Birmingham which conducts an annual survey of student satisfaction; and data on the positive and negative aspects of the students' experience is used to establish priorities for management attention. The aspects which underpin the questionnaire are travel to the university; access to facilities (libraries, computing, and refectories); student support; teaching and learning; social life and self-development; and finance (Green *et al*, 1994). Given the diversity of the mature student body and the enormous variety in their experience, Elliott (1999) has drawn attention to some "significant silences" in our knowledge of the student experience including, for example, their campus involvement or the lack of it.

The HE student experience traditionally involved 3-4 years full-time study at a campus-based university, however, over the last 30 years, there has been a fundamental shift away from this, reflecting the massive growth in numbers and the increasing diversity of the student body. Also, expansion has led to a severe reduction in staff:student ratios (Payne and McNair, undated). A recent seminar organised by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), (2003a), reflected on how the student experience was changing due to 'distributed HE' whereby 25 per cent of HE students study external to an HEI; the modular curriculum which has reduced the feeling of 'belonging' to a course and group of students; and term-time working which reduces attention to academic study. CHERI (2003b) has found that around 50 per cent of undergraduates now undertake paid work, and older students and those living with a partner an/or dependent children were more likely to work long hours than younger students (27 and 14 per cent respectively). Studies in Australia by McInnis and colleagues (2001) have also noted new patterns of engagement as students have an increasing number of activities and priorities that compete with the demands of HE study. But McInnis identifies a paucity of research to guide institutional policy and practice related to managing the student experience.

On the basis of the literature, I concluded there was a gap in current knowledge of the adult students' experience of HE and how the student experience of HE is meeting individual needs for lifelong learning. I applied a wide definition to the term 'student experience'; it embraces all aspects of a student's interaction with the HE institution including admission, teaching and learning, student support services, and facilities, and the impact of being a student on the life-world of the individual.

Chapter 3: The Research Process

Summary

In my research, I was seeking to gain an insight into the nature and meaning of lifelong learning for adult learners. I aimed to explore individual histories and identify explicit changes that are needed in higher education (HE) practice in order to fit lifelong learning programmes more closely to the needs of learners. I anticipated that my findings and conclusions would be disseminated to, and read by, teaching and learning professionals. My research entailed examining the biographical routes by which adults enter HE, their motivations, and their experience of learning in HE. Such subjective issues are best addressed through research in a qualitative paradigm.

In the first section of this chapter, I outline the methodological issues that I considered in formulating my research design, including the writings of experienced researchers, and the methods used by four research programmes in a related field of enquiry. In the second section, I describe the practical measures I took in identifying and gaining access to my research subjects; the pilot interview and preparation of my interview plan; the conduct of the main body of interviews, their transcription and agreement with the participants; and the approach I took to analysis and interpretation of the data. This is a reflexive account of the practicalities of field research, what worked well or less well, the difficulties I encountered and how I overcame them, in light of the theory on the conduct of such studies.

Section 1: Methodology: umbrellas, vistas and paths

Which umbrella? The qualitative research paradigm

The qualitative or naturalistic paradigm is a mode of behavioural inquiry distinguished from the quantitative or scientific paradigm by a number of assumptions and

characteristics (see for example, Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Scott, 1996a; and Patton, 2002). A central assumption is that a profound understanding of the world can be gained through conversation and observation in natural settings (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998:119), and therefore, qualitative research relies on field study as a fundamental technique. A variety of empirical materials are used including case study, personal experience, life story, interview, observational and interactional texts that describe routine and problematic moments, in order to make sense of, or interpret the meanings people give to their lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:2). Findings are produced without the use of statistical procedures; although some of the data may be quantified, the analysis is a qualitative one (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:17). Many respected authors (including Denzin and Lincoln, Strauss and Corbin) indicate that research that attempts to uncover the nature of a person's experiences with a phenomenon naturally lends itself to qualitative research, and it is the "method of choice when dealing with human behaviours" for Guba and Lincoln (1981:63). A qualitative approach was therefore an appropriate choice in light of my research aims.

Within the qualitative paradigm, there are a range of major perspectives that structure and organise research which can be likened to "an umbrella with each spoke representing another view of the world, another paradigm." (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998:120) My perspective is constructivist, within a hermeneutic/interpretive framework. In my research, I did not set out with a formulated hypothesis, but more on a path of discovery. I wanted to look at the world of HE from the point of view of the individual participant, and to produce more informed understandings of the HE experience of adult learners.

Exploring uncharted territory: research design

The elements to be considered in formulating a qualitative research design include the research sample, strategy of inquiry and methods, and the role of the researcher, as illustrated in the following quotation:

"Qualitative research is an inductive form of inquiry whose results are a blend of research skill, luck and a particular perspective. Like the fisherman on uncharted waters, you may have an idea of what lies beneath the surface, but you cannot always be sure. As the fisherman knows, where you happen to anchor your boat, the particular lure you choose and the skill you demonstrate in fishing has a great deal to do with what you catch." (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998:119).

Addressing these points in turn, firstly, I was aware that as an adult learner in HE, I already had my own views and perspectives on the issues under investigation, and inevitably the study is subjective. Burgess (1982) recommends that as an 'insider', the field researcher has to be both self-critical and self-aware, thus superimposing an 'outsider's perspective' onto the 'insider's view'. The steps I took to be credible, balanced and fair in data collection, analysis and interpretation, are discussed in the next section. Secondly, the selection of a sample of adult students to study was an important consideration. Erben (1998:5) indicates that in qualitative research, the sample size cannot be ascertained through quantitative methods. Instead, the sample must be consciously chosen in light of the overall aims of the study. Accepting that no two individuals are the same, I defined certain principles for the inclusion of informants, and the procedures by which I put together my research sample are detailed later in this chapter. Thirdly, I considered carefully the strategy of inquiry and research methods that I should use.

Strategies have different purposes, each offering a particular perspective that illuminates certain aspects of reality more easily than others and producing results more suited for some applications than others, according to Morse (1994:223). Given that my focus of interest is the way in which different people experience and interpret their lives, the strategies of inquiry available to me included case study, grounded theory and the biographical method. Each of these entails different methods and restrictions on the types of data that can be collected. Generally, case study research is

useful for looking systematically at the variations between individuals, but I felt that my aims would be best served by taking a broad view across a group of adult learners rather than an in-depth study of a limited number of individuals. Grounded theory emphasises an inductive approach to data analysis and theory development where the initial analysis is not contaminated by the researcher's theoretical conceptualisations and understandings (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). I thought it would be impossible to put to one side my preconceptions derived from experiences as both a teacher and student in HE and, since I was not aiming to develop theories, an alternative methodology would serve my purposes better.

The appeal of biographical research is that it aids understanding of societal changes by exploring how individuals interpret their experiences (Roberts, 2002). Insights into the nature and meaning of individual lives provide insights into cultural and social forces in society (Erben, 1996). As I wanted to trace the routes by which individual adults become mature students at HE level, and gain a greater understanding of the implications of their experience for the government policy agenda, the purposes of my research could be readily addressed by the biographical method.

Biographical research: opening up a new vista

Biographical research involves the collection and study of empirical information in the form of "life documents" (Denzin, 1989:7). There are many biographical methods or ways of writing about a life and the documents can be presented in a variety of formats, such as memoirs, autobiographies, and life histories, each with slightly different perspectives under consideration. West (1996:13) drawing on Thompson, (1988), outlines three ways in which life history material can be used. First, by focusing on a single life story which illuminates a number of complex themes; second, by grouping a collection of stories around common themes; and third, life stories can be seen as a potential quarry from which to construct an argument which goes beyond the material alone. I took the third approach. My aim was to collect personal stories

from a number of learners, to identify individual motivations and different experiences of learning, and to reflect on the implications for the development of a more responsive HE. I focused on a specific period in their lives, rather than covering their full life history.

My approach was essentially phenomenological, asking volunteers to think about the nature of their learning experience and what it means, relying on retrospective reflection. Rather than gathering data and reproducing fragments of transcripts, letting "the informants speak for themselves", I have picked out themes and analysed the interviews for relevant anecdotes that illustrate these themes, and added my own interpretive comments. Thus, in Van Manen's definition, my approach can be described as hermeneutic phenomenology. The 'facts' of the lived experience are being captured in language and set down in text, and the data are interpreted to determine the meaning embodied in them (Van Manen, 1998:180-1).

The characteristic features of an interpretive approach to biographical work are set out by Denzin. The research begins by focusing on a set of experiences in the individual's life, often connected to life-course stages such as childhood and adolescence, and to life-course experiences of education marriage and employment. Biographical materials are gathered via the use of the narrative interviewing strategy, with the interviewer prompting the individual to expand on various sections of their stories. These narratives are then subject to careful reading and interpretation so that patterns of meaning and experience are identified (Denzin, 1989:56). The process can be summarised as: "Lives are lived through time but made intelligible through narrative." (Erben, 2000:383).

Particularly relevant to my research aims is the notion of 'epiphanies' or turning-point moments in an individual's life. Denzin (1989:70) defines these as "interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives"; they are often moments of crisis, and their effects may be positive or negative. Sub-questions within

my research framework were concerned with what are the motivators for adults returning to study in HE and why and when do individuals take up learning. Thus the concept of epiphanies was useful for data collection and analysis.

The process of investigating experience presents particular challenges. The researcher is studying the stories that people tell them and attempting to understand their meaning, and individuals also interpret the experience they have had. It follows that language, speech and thought mediate and define the experience being described (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:356). The meanings that an individual attributes to their experiences can change with time:

> "The meanings of these experiences are always given retrospectively, as they are relived and re-experienced in the stories persons tell about what has happened to them." (Denzin, 1989:71).

Van Manen points out that experiential accounts are never identical to lived experience itself. Thus all recollections of, and reflections on, experience are already transformations of these experiences. Continuing with the fishing analogy used earlier:

> "The meanings we bring to the surface from the depths of life's oceans have already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence" (Van Manen, 1998:54).

A further difficulty identified by Denzin (1989:74) is that many times a storyteller may neglect important factors that have impinged on their life. Thus, all biographical accounts are only partial, and the limitations of the method must be borne in mind throughout the research process.

The paths between the trees: data collection methods

There were a number of ways of collecting experiential material open to me, including asking individuals to write their experiences down, interviewing, and observation. While it appears straightforward, there are difficulties in asking individuals to write personal descriptions or self-reports, or to keep a diary to record their experiences. Van Manen (1998:64) states that most people find the task of writing difficult and will talk with more ease and less reserve than when they write their thoughts on paper. The level of effort involved and the limitations of education and experience may mean that respondents produce very little text, although this should be less of a problem in conducting research with adult students in higher education. Furthermore, writing forces a person into a reflective attitude, in contrast to a face-to-face conversation where people are more immediately involved. Self-completion questionnaires suffer from similar limitations, and self-reports tend to reflect socially acceptable responses rather then what actually might occur (Anderson, 1998:105). In light of these difficulties, I decided these methods were not appropriate for my research.

Observational data is valuable when the purpose is to describe the setting, the activities that took place, and the meanings of what is observed from the perspectives of the people who participated (Patton, 2002:262). Observation gives the opportunity to see things that participants may not be aware of, but there are also limitations, for example, feelings, intentions and underlying motivations cannot be observed. Observation was not therefore the most appropriate technique for obtaining the type of data I wanted. However, in conjunction with the interview method, unobtrusive recording of observational data and non-verbal cues is useful to alert an interviewer to those issues that are sensitive for a respondent, and may add depth to the analysis of data. I therefore attempted to record observations during interviews and wrote them up later in my field notes, although I found observation was difficult to undertake in tandem with conducting an interview.

The interview method is especially useful for the collection of biographical data, and an interview can take several forms, structured, semi-structured, and informal or unstructured. In a structured interview, the locus of control rests with the interviewer who poses questions and records answers in a set pattern. Some writers (such as Oakley, 1981) argue that this puts the interviewer in an unnatural relationship with those who are researched, and qualitative researchers generally prefer to use a semi-structured or informal style of interviewing which employs a set of themes and topics to form questions in the course of conversation (Burgess, 1994; Plummer, 1983). In this mode, the technique gives latitude for responses to be explored and elaborated, and enables the interviewer to probe, redirect the questioning, and summarise. Dexter describes this as a 'conversation with a purpose', encouraging the interviewee to structure their account of the situation and to introduce what they regard as relevant, instead of relying upon the investigator's notion of relevance (Dexter, 1970 in Lincoln and Guba, 1985:268).

Among the strengths of the interview is that there is less chance of misunderstanding between the interviewer and respondent than in other approaches, and the interviewer is likely to receive more accurate responses on sensitive issues (Guba and Lincoln, 1981:186-7). Also, it can allow access to past events and situations in which the researcher is not able to be present (Burgess, 1984). However, the interview is not a neutral tool and is highly vulnerable to bias. The researcher's perspective influences what might be found since we view a situation through different 'lens' even though our methodological approaches and techniques may be similar. The interview is influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer including class, ethnicity, and gender and there are also gender and cultural differences in the way respondents experience research interviews (Oakley, 1981; Burgess, 1984; Finch, 1993). Therefore, in using the interview as a tool for biographical research, it has to be borne in mind that:

"The way an interviewer acts, questions and responds in an interview shapes the relationship and, therefore, the ways participants respond and give accounts of their experience." (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994:415)

In later sections, I shall reflect on the impact of myself as the research instrument, on the research process and data collected.

Paths trodden by other social science researchers

Four research studies with similar aims to my own, entailed biographical research and used the interview method as the principle research tool. These studies by Clarke, Bourgeois and colleagues, West, and Lunneborg and the ways they influenced my research design are outlined below.

Clarke

Julia Clarke (PhD thesis, 1998) used a life history approach to explore the relationship between individual biographies and participation in adult continuing education. She conducted eighteen interviews, a series of three with each interviewee; issued a questionnaire to obtain written responses to issues arising in interviews that were not included in the interview schedule; and held a final group meeting to enable participants to meet others, check interpretations, and evaluate the experience of participating in the research.

I took a similar path to Clarke in holding one-to-one interviews, tape-recording and transcribing interviews. However, due to the smaller scale of my EdD research, I decided to limit data collection to one in-depth interview with each volunteer. I drew up a set of criteria for inclusion of informants and made contact with my research population in a similar way, by asking course tutors to distribute written requests to adult students. I also conducted a pilot interview with someone already known to me who conformed to the criteria, and the interview was unstructured in order to see what

concepts were being construed in the discourse. From this I was able to construct a list of interview questions to give to volunteers a week in advance, to provide prompts for discussion. On the whole, I found Clarke's approach most instructive.

As indicated earlier, the researcher's perspective influences the 'lens' through which we view a situation and this is the key point of diversion in our respective research. Clarke writes from a feminist perspective with a concern for emancipation from domesticity. As she explains in the introduction to her thesis: "the feminist critique (...) underpins much of the thinking presented in this study." (1998:i). So, although our methodological approaches and techniques may be similar, my perspective is constructivist, and I looked at my research problem and the data collected, through different 'lens'.

Bourgeois

Bourgeois and colleagues at the University of Warwick used a life histories method to research the issues and problems of being a mature student at university (Bourgeois *et al*, 1999). The four-year study during the early 1990s, involved a small sample of adult students from four departments, including Sociology with a high adult student participation rate, and Biological Sciences with very few adult students. The methods included interviewing students on two occasions with the second interview towards the end of the final year of study. The authors (ibid:99) draw on an article by Weil (1989) to explain the appropriateness of qualitative research for this enquiry:

> "It is a mode of research that does not predefine the nature of learning and adult learners' experiences (...) Research that is grounded in a concern with meaning and relevance rather than measurement and typology can shift the ground from which we seek to understand the experiences of adult learners. It has the capacity to enrich - and to re-define - theory and practice related to adults' learning."

My research is on a smaller scale than the Warwick study and I did not have the time or resources to undertake a longitudinal study, but the findings gave me pointers on issues to cover in my research, and in relation to methodology, the composition of my research population. Bourgeois (ibid:118) states that practises and attitudes towards mature students varied between departments even within the same faculty so "the characteristics of a department play an influential role in determining the quality of undergraduate student life for adults". The research found that some lecturers recognised the importance of life-experiences in relation to the learning process of mature students and tried to incorporate them into their teaching, and that mature students were perceived to be a problem in science. Therefore, I decided that I must draw my sample from several departments and analyse the data to see if interviewees comment on their lecturer's supportive or unsympathetic attitudes to them as mature students.

West

Another major study by West (1996) made extensive use of the biographical approach to research the experiences of mature students in HE. West's aims were similar to my own in being concerned with the relationship between motives, educational participation, and present situations, but went further in looking at how motives, feelings towards self and others, as well as biographical understandings, were affected by HE (ibid:x). Funded by HEFCE, and conducted at the University of Kent from 1992-95, the study involved seven individual interviews lasting two hours or more over three years with thirty adult learners, and also made use of personal journals. West (ibid:xi) used a feminist frame of reference and the research provides a comprehensive social psychoanalytical perspective on the motivation of adults to enter and continue education at particular stages in their lives, and what participation has meant to them.

My study is of course, neither funded nor longitudinal, but I took a similar path in using the method of reflexive conversations about experiences, and in recording,

analysing, and theorising on motivation in the biographies of adult learners. My research population was different. West's research was conducted with students enrolled on Access and Foundation programmes in "localities in crisis, experiencing major economic and social dislocations" (ibid:x) in which West could guarantee a diversity of students in the group, working and middle class, white and black, young and old, men and women. My research was conducted with students who had already embarked on a course of higher education and there was no similarity in the social and economic conditions. Within my smaller sample of fifteen mature students, I aimed for a range of ages and a mix of male and female, but had no expectations of gaining a sample that was representative of the social mix of the local community.

The approach used by West provided useful insights for my own research. In the story of Kathy (ibid:4) she illustrates the importance of giving subjects the space and encouragement to reflect on motives. I noted that, in looking at why adults return to HE, it is important to probe the relationship between a particular career aspiration and a personal history; and what the choice of a specific subject, and attending university more generally, might represent at an emotional and biographical level. West also pointed out that the stories people tell of their lives and motives can be influenced by what they think others want to hear or say about them:

> "Individuals who lack confidence or a sense of their own legitimacy may often reflect the stories powerful others tell about them. People may repress and exclude aspects of lived experience, because this is either threatening or considered inconsequential and of little interest to others. Medium and message, narrative and experience, reality and representation, self and story, are not easily prized apart. Story itself is a vehicle for experiment in self-composure: the more a story convinces others, whether teachers, students or researchers, the more it may constitute a new, emerging reality." (West, 1996:10).

These are important considerations to bear in mind when interpreting the meanings that people give to their lives.

Lunneborg

Lunneborg (1997) presents fifteen case histories of men who became lifelong learners by studying for a degree with The Open University. Each case history was prepared from one taped interview that lasted two hours. The men's names were provided by the University Press Officer, from lists of OU graduates of 1993-94 who had agreed to be contacted about their educational experiences, with the exception of one graduate already known to the author. The author gives no further information on methodology, however I infer from the Acknowledgements (ibid:x) that the tapes were analysed several months later when the author returned to America, and the interviewees did not have an opportunity to check for errors or misunderstandings in the transcription of their stories. The interviews were the first and only encounter. My study differed in that I gained access to my research sample by contacting academic staff and the volunteers actively responded to their tutor's request to make contact with me. Also, I thought that it was important to meet volunteers for an initial briefing meeting before the interview took place. My interviews were shorter, lasting around one hour, but the transcriptions were returned to the participants for checking and approval.

I gained a number of lessons from Lunneborg's study. Firstly, it demonstrated the importance of a researcher being flexible when using a life histories method. Lunneborg planned to focus on how a university degree, aside from benefiting a man's job prospects, affected their relationships, leisure and values. However, in the interviews, questions on these areas "produced a lot of hemming and hawing" (ibid:xi) and it was only when talking about their jobs and careers that they opened up. Secondly, it illustrated that researchers should be aware that they bring their own assumptions about adult learners' experiences and their impact. Lunneborg is an American female academic and her interviewees were British subjects, some from very limited educational backgrounds. Sir John Daniel in the Foreword, feels that the book

gains from being written with the fresh eyes of an American who "explores aspects of life which a British male author would have taken for granted." (ibid:viii).

Each case history begins with a short portrait covering the man's appearance, educational and employment history then proceeds on a question and answer basis. The portraits bring the characters to life and influenced me to provide a short profile of each of my volunteers, which are included at Appendix 1. While Lunneborg's case histories cover much common ground, there is not uniform inclusion of, for example, the question on 'why continuing education would be recommended to other men'. Also, the question on 'obstacles encountered' is sometimes answered more in relation to compulsory education than the recent experience of adult education. This variation reinforced my view that it is important for the interviewer to work from an interview schedule that acts as a checklist of aspects to cover and probe with all interviewees. I analysed Lunneborg's case histories under three questions that addressed areas similar to those of my research, for example, "Your reasons for doing a university degree?" and found that relevant information might emerge in other responses. Therefore, I noted that as well as using probing questions to prompt an interviewee to expand on their stories, I must search all answers for points relevant to particular themes when undertaking analysis and categorisation of transcribed data.

Section 2: Drawing back the curtain: data collection and analysis

Locating informants

As a first step in identifying a sample population, I considered the characteristics that my informants would need to hold. Clarke (1998) chose to interview women whose biographies conformed to characteristics that feature consistently in various typologies of "non-participants" in adult continuing education. While Clarke's approach is exclusive, I wanted to be inclusive of adult learners from diverse backgrounds and not limited by my own pre-conceptions of lifelong learners, so as to avoid creating bias in

my sample. My research aims did not cover access issues, so I wanted to target people who were already engaged in a HE experience. I also wanted to focus on adults who had returned to study in HE after a gap, as distinct to people who had been continuously in education since initial compulsory education. Any higher level programme at undergraduate or postgraduate level was of equal interest as the "Dearing Report" (NCIHE, 1997) had indicated that HE should provide shorter programmes such as certificates and diplomas for people returning repeatedly to update themselves or change direction. I estimated that the age of volunteers would be around 25+ for a student on a first degree or 30+ for a higher degree student.

I anticipated that individuals conforming to these characteristics would most likely be attending courses with a high percentage of mature students such as in a Faculty of Social Science and at New College, University of Southampton, which particularly welcomes students who have reached university through non-traditional routes. I therefore arranged a meeting with a senior tutor at the College to obtain advice about courses on which people meeting my criteria might enrol. At this stage, I could not be sure that my proposed research would be welcomed or even tolerated, as academic staff may be wary of a study that appears to evaluate provision for adult students. As a result of my meeting, I gained a list of the names of key contacts or "gatekeepers" across the University, through whom I could approach students although I was asked to not identify the source. More positively, I inferred that the institutional environment was potentially receptive to my study, provided that I approached tutors with a sound explanation for my interest.

One issue that the Senior Tutor drew to my attention was that students on certain courses would have particular attributes that would bias the sample. He advised that students on Community Studies courses were typically working in public agencies with vocational reasons for study, and would comprise women from ethnic minority groups as well as middle class participants. In contrast, students on Modern Languages courses would include better off, educated people, some retired with second homes in

France. The cohort on Counselling courses was predominantly women, whereas IT courses would have more men, and motives might be vocational or a wider interest for those who had retired early. I concluded that I should try to gain as diverse a sample as possible within the constraints of my small-scale research project, rather than seek volunteers in only two or three subject areas. Therefore, to include a range of educational backgrounds and learning experiences, I established the following principles for inclusion of informants:

1. Must have had a gap of at least 5 years since completing initial full-time education.

2. Must be currently enrolled on a course of higher education at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

3. Must be drawn from across the spectrum of learners, including male and female, a range of ages, on full-time and part-time courses, in different subjects such as arts, technology and business.

According to Patton (2002:244), there are no rules for sample size in a qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on the purpose of the research, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources. To ensure rigour in sampling, he advises "purposeful selection" of informants, so that the sample is "information rich". Of the range of purposeful sampling techniques that can be used in educational settings, my sample conforms to the 'convenience' and 'criterion' categories of Arsenault and Anderson (1998:124), in that my volunteers were quickly and easily available, being people I already knew or volunteers from the University I was studying at, and secondly, individuals who fitted a set of predetermined criteria. I also sought to gain as diverse a population as possible by purposefully contacting tutors who could give me access to students from different educational backgrounds. I

was aiming for a sample size of ten to twelve students, as I thought a smaller number of informants would not necessarily be representative.

I decided to contact nine tutors drawn from different faculties and departments across the University. The group comprised Engineering, Information Technology, Law, Sociology, English, Business and Management, Health and Well-being, and two subject areas within Social and Policy Studies. I held a couple of names of tutors 'in reserve' as well as personal contacts at Southampton Institute that I could follow-up if the initial group of contacts did not produce sufficient volunteers. I drafted a personal letter to tutors asking for help in reaching students who might participate in my research. To obtain an address, I telephoned one tutor, and the questions she posed helped me to decide on the content of my letter, an example of which is shown at Appendix 2. I asked for one or two volunteers from each course for two reasons. Firstly, I could not assume that all of the tutors would be able to help. Secondly, I did not want these "gatekeepers" to suggest person 'a' or 'b' as this would introduce bias in my sample, so I emphasised the characteristics of the people I was seeking to meet. I included a paper describing my research in more detail plus two envelopes to pass to students which also contained a copy of the paper, a self-selection reply form plus a stamped addressed envelope.

My briefing paper and reply form is included at Appendices 3 and 4 respectively. In drafting these documents, I took note of the documentation that Clarke (1998) had prepared for her study with adult students. Aspects that I decided to incorporate included brief biographical details about myself to give credibility and authority, the topic for my research, why this interests me, and what the research would not focus upon. To reassure tutors, I said I would not be evaluating courses, and I referred to learners following increasingly "individuated learning pathways" (HEE, 1997) to distinguish my study from others. Anticipating that potential volunteers would read my wording carefully, and not wanting to frighten them off by appearing too interested in their personal life, I avoided mention of family background, values and attitudes,

and referred instead to motivation, influences and choices. I stated the characteristics of the people I wanted to meet. I thought about how these might be interpreted, and whether to elaborate, but decided to keep my list simple and deal with any misunderstandings if they arose, directly with the volunteer.

The paper indicated what participation would entail: an initial briefing meeting, an interview to be tape-recorded and transcribed; the timetable and location; and a reassurance that volunteers could withdraw at any point. Recognising the importance of willing informants, I felt that an initial short meeting to talk about the project would enable individuals to decide whether or not to be involved. Also at this stage, I may need to exclude a volunteer if it became apparent they did not meet my criteria. In summary, in drafting my briefing paper, I wanted to sound approachable, students to infer that participation was worthwhile, and tutors to feel sufficiently informed to co-operate in passing information to their students. Finally, I thought it important to keep my briefing to one page and easy to read in short paragraphs.

I thought carefully about the inclusion of a stamped addressed envelope, as this would reveal my home address to strangers and put my personal safety at risk. The alternative was to use the University internal mail but this would involve long trips on a frequent basis to check for post. I reasoned that I should have nothing to fear when the letters could be traced via the University tutors and the reply form required volunteers to give me their own contact address. However, as a safeguard, I decided to number the reply forms and record which were sent to each tutor, so that I could track replies, and I resolved to hold my initial meeting with volunteers in a public place.

Establishing interview themes

I undertook a pilot interview with a work colleague who conformed to my criteria for informants. Goodson and Sikes (2001) advise researchers to think carefully before involving colleagues who may be cautious about what they reveal. By way of

introduction, I outlined my research questions and the biographical approach, emphasising that I wanted to learn about the educational experiences in my colleague's life. I indicated that I had prepared a few broad questions to get the interview started, but I would largely be conducting an unstructured interview in order to subsequently identify the issues that arose in the discourse.

I began by asking, "How did the idea of undertaking higher education first arise for you?" and Anthony described his thoughts on leaving school, his employment experience and academic interests. I asked what influenced his decision to take up HE, and then how it felt to study in HE. This lead to talking about positive aspects, obstacles, and the support of family members. Anthony had more than one experience of HE, and I realised that my approach would have to be flexible to enable different episodes to be covered, as well as explore needs and motives that changed with time. The issue of how HE was supporting an adult student combining learning and employment arose, and changes that HE could make were suggested. As the hour allocated for our interview drew to a close, I drew on a 'catch-all' question I knew from my selection interviewing experience, and asked, "Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experience as a student in higher education?" and subsequently decided to include this question in my interview plan as it gives the interviewee the opportunity to volunteer relevant information that the interviewer has not fully covered.

I analysed the interview transcript to identify the themes that had arisen as well as lines of enquiry that I did not have an opportunity to fully explore. I drafted questions that I would need to put to volunteers to fill out my understanding of each main theme, writing them down in a modified questionnaire format. I sequenced the questions in what appeared on the basis of the pilot interview, to be a logical order of questioning. For example, identifying the individual's main life stages at the start of the interview would help to structure subsequent questioning. In sequencing individual questions, I looked for an order that would help the interviewee see the connections and relevance

of my line of questioning. This was particularly important with a question on the impact of studies on home life, as I did not want to appear to pry into an individual's personal circumstances. Wilson (1996:105) advises that such questions, being sensitive, may be resented and are best put towards the end of the interview.

Developing the interview plan

By reflecting on the information obtained in the pilot interview, I was able to develop an interview guide or plan to act as a checklist for my second interview. Generally, I noted that I needed to allocate time better and focus less on the initial decision to enter HE, so as to cover more fully questions on what it is like studying in HE and any changes that would encourage learners to return to HE. Also, I felt that I should exert more control over the interview to avoid repetition and keep within the boundaries of my research questions.

My second interviewee was also a work colleague, and as part of my briefing, I gave her my interview guide. Carol said that this was helpful, enabling her to prepare her thoughts and recollect the details of several episodes of full and part-time study. The interview largely covered the issues in the interview plan but I observed that I needed to be flexible in my questioning and adapt the sequence and precise wording to fit in with the preceding answer. Also, I recognised the limitations of a one-hour interview in probing an individual's motivation and experiences. Carol was very articulate and knowledgeable about HE, and I realised the importance of asking about experience, as opposed to inviting opinion.

In light of Carol's remarks, I decided to give the interview plan to all interviewees. I gave careful thought to the wording of the questions and how they might be interpreted, and restricted myself to a manageable number of important questions. I phrased the majority as open questions, beginning with 'What?', 'In what way?' and 'How do you feel?' Such questions are the major type used in information-gathering

interviews because they encourage an individual to talk through their ideas while the interviewer listens. Thus they help an interviewer to discover the respondent's priorities and evaluate the degree of emphasis to put on their response (Anderson, 1998:184). Open questions also have limitations for example, with a talkative individual, it is more difficult to control the interview. Closed questions restrict the options available to the respondent but are useful where a more specific factual response is required, for example, "Is a vocational focus important to you?" I therefore included a few closed questions alongside the open questions, with the aim of opening up topics for discussion and giving respondents some control over the interview.

The questions were organised into sections covering the various themes, beginning with an interviewee's main life stages and choices made; a section entitled, 'Initial experience of Higher Education (Where applicable)' to distinguish from 'Current experience of Higher Education'; and a section on 'Lifelong learning' to ensure inclusion of questions on future learning. Also, I added the instruction, "Please use these pages to make notes or prompts for anything you would like to say" to clarify the purpose of giving the plan to participants, and remove any expectation that we would rigidly follow the order of questions. With the refinements incorporated after my second and third interviews, I was satisfied that the interview plan would provide information to answer my research questions, and the version shown in Appendix 5 was used as the basis of subsequent interviews.

Anderson (ibid:183) states that the way that an interviewer plans to proceed with an interview is not typically shared with respondents, and the interviewer has to gain their confidence before asking what might be threatening questions. However, I felt that sharing my interview plan with volunteers not only enabled them to give some thought to the topics prior to the interview, but also provided some reassurance if they had concerns. In some cases, volunteers had given quite a bit of thought to the questions and jotted down notes, but in others, it appeared that they had only given them a

54

cursory glance. There were no instances in which giving a volunteer the plan led to a disruption of the data collection process, nor were any questions refused.

The interview timetable

Fieldwork was conducted during the academic year 2000-2001, beginning with interviews with three people I already knew who conformed to the criteria for informants. To access further volunteers, my letters to tutors were despatched at the end of April 2001 in order to reach students before their last class of the academic year and enable me to conduct interviews over the period May to August. My timing was successful and I received ten reply forms within two weeks. I immediately telephoned each volunteer to arrange an initial meeting at a mutually convenient location. After two to three weeks, I received a further three forms. My first reaction was not to make contact as I had sufficient volunteers, but I arranged initial meetings and found that they had interesting life stories that were different to earlier respondents. So, I held interviews with two of the individuals; the third was not available within my interview timescale. Thus, by the end of July, I had completed fifteen interviews rather than the ten to twelve I had originally intended.

In retrospect, I should have waited until I received all the completed reply forms so that after telephone interviews, I could put together a sample that was as differentiated as possible in terms of my criteria for inclusion. However, each individual had a unique combination of motives and experiences which added to the richness of my study, and until the transcripts were agreed, I could not be sure that one or more of my volunteers might withdraw. Therefore, I reasoned that it was better to have more data than too little. The sample size certainly appeared to be adequate as I obtained repetition (Morse, 1994:230).

Initial meetings with volunteers were held in a public place, typically in a student common room or cafeteria, or the Staff Club. My purpose was to introduce myself and

my research aims and establish a climate of trust; obtain some background knowledge of the respondent's employment and study experience; and gain their agreement to participate in a tape-recorded research interview. I prepared an Agenda for the meeting, shown at Appendix 6 and took the volunteer through Notes of Guidance shown at Appendix 7. In drafting this I drew on the forms used by West (1996:219-221) and Clarke (1998:197). I made brief notes during and after the meeting in order that I could tailor the coverage of the interview to each individual, and begin in a sociable and relaxed way. The initial meeting concluded by arranging a date, time and venue for the formal interview. The interviews with women volunteers were usually held at the volunteer's home, at their suggestion, and two were held in my home, while the interviews with male volunteers took place in a private room at the University, or in one case, in a quiet area of a hotel lounge.

Getting to know you: conduct of the main body of interviews

The main body of interviews followed a common pattern. In my introduction, prior to switching on the tape-recorder, I thanked the volunteer and briefly reiterated the purpose and the process by which I hoped to conduct the interview. The use of the interview plan enabled similar information to be obtained from each interviewee, but at the same time, a conversational style was used, with the order and phrasing of each question varied according to the respondent's previous responses. This style of interview is demanding as an interviewer has both to engage with a respondent and remain detached in order to structure the interview, but it gave me the opportunity to probe and follow-up on points. I also experienced the weaknesses that Patton (2002:349) attributes to the use of an interview guide, namely that some topics were inadvertently omitted, this reducing the comparability of responses. To conclude the interview, I indicated when we had covered all the main topics, invited the interviewee to add anything they wished, and added my thanks. After switching off the tape, I usually referred to a particularly helpful contribution, and explained what would happen next. At this stage, when the taped interview had ended, several interviewees

continued the conversation by elaborating a point that had arisen, asking me questions about my experiences, or even asking for my advice. On one occasion, the interviewee confided additional personal information that she had not wished to be recorded on tape but which she thought would be helpful to my understanding.

The writings of Denzin (1970), Burgess (1984), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Powney and Watts (1987), were particularly helpful in alerting me to the issues and problems that arise in conducting interviews in field research. Firstly, empathy between interviewer and respondent is important for good data collection (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). A number of interpersonal factors influence this, including the status of the interviewer and interviewee. Denzin (1970) and Simons (1981) advise that a degree of equality should permeate the interview, and an interviewer should try to dispossess respondents of any notions that they are the expert. If a fit in backgrounds and status is not maximized, "the investigator runs the risk of having his interviews conducted between selves talking past one another." (Denzin, 1970:136).

I aimed to set a friendly and relaxed tone and establish rapport by presenting myself as a fellow student occupying the same world as my volunteers and having struggled to balance the demands of study alongside work and other commitments. I outlined only briefly my work history and I did not, for example, refer to my previous employment with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education as I did not want my volunteers to infer that my research had formal backing or undisclosed motives. I was aware that respondents can ascribe beliefs and opinions on the basis of appearance and language (Oakley, 1981; Jones, 1985; Wilson, 1996) so I dressed in neutral, casual clothes typically worn on campus, and I paid attention to my non-verbal behaviour, such as maintaining eye contact.

The degree to which a researcher reveals personal aspects of their life to build rapport, must be weighed carefully against what may be gained or lost by this disclosure (Denzin, 1970:138). Goodson and Sikes (2001:94) cite a number of authors who

regard 'reciprocity' (for example, Oakley, 1981) as good feminist practice because it results in less exploitative interviews. I found that I revealed personal information where a volunteer and I had something in common but generally, they were not overly concerned to know about my personal life and background. There was an exception with the first interview I conducted in my own home when we spent much longer in preliminary conversation, revealing information on my lifestyle and values. This need to talk might reflect anxiety on behalf of the volunteer, but also, being one of my earlier interviews, I was feeling a little apprehensive too. On reflection, I could have been more focused on the task in hand, however, the rapport that was established probably helped me gain the trust of the individual. She revealed personal information that I anticipated she would delete from the transcript and I was very pleased when she did not, as suitably anonymised, this data was very pertinent to my research. However, as this example illustrates, the collection of data raised ethical issues.

Protecting confidences

Ethics in the research process is founded on the central principle that the individuals involved should give their 'informed consent' to participate, and should be protected from being harmed by it (see for example, Burgess, 1989, and Sapsford and Abbott, 1996). Protection and rights to privacy are usually assured by guarantees of confidentiality and undertakings to disguise or make anonymous any public references. I sought to obtain informed consent through providing written and oral information, and giving volunteers the opportunity to ask me questions about my research. The "Notes of Guidance for Interviewees & Agreement Form" (included at Appendix 7) which was signed by both parties and exchanged before the tape-recorded interview commenced is a formal record of my undertakings and the volunteer's consent. Although it is questionable how far consent can be informed when subjects do not have the researcher's training and background, I believe that because my volunteers were fellow university students, they understood what they were committing themselves to, and the use to which the research would be put.

I gained a high level of trust from my volunteers who addressed all questions posed, and freely named family members and university tutors when recounting their experiences. I always invited interviewees to choose a pseudonym for themselves and others and to delete any material they wished from the interview transcript, although only a few made amendments. It has been argued that being a woman interviewer is an advantage since both women and men are more likely to talk about personal aspects of their lives to a female than a male researcher (Measor, 1985). Finch (1993) draws attention to the ease with which a woman researcher can elicit material from other women. She attributes this to women being more used than men to accepting intrusions through questioning into the more private parts of their lives and, in the setting of their own home, an interview can easily take on the character of an intimate conversation. Finch also said that the structural position of women makes it likely they will welcome the opportunity to talk to a sympathetic listener and to try to make sense of some of the contradictions in their lives. As a consequence, Riddell (1989) raises the possibility that a woman may reveal more than she wishes about herself. These authors highlight the importance of acting to protect the subjects of research.

Although volunteers shared information of a personal nature, which had implications for confidentiality and anonymity, my interviews did not intrude into personal lives in such a way as to pose the psychological risks identified by Patton (2002). A human issue to which Arsenault and Anderson (1998:127) draw attention, is that participants can feel void after the departure of the researcher. It is difficult to gauge whether my volunteers had such a reaction. One female expressed a wish that we keep in touch after the interview, and indicated that she may want to come back to me for help with her studies in future. For my own part, I felt sad to end the relationships I had established but I felt it was inappropriate to continue links after the transcript was agreed.

Penetrating private worlds

I was pleasantly surprised as well as humbled by the preparedness of my volunteers to give me a window into their private worlds. As Denzin (1970:134) says, it is obvious that an interviewer gains the respondent's time, attention and whatever information s/he has to offer, but what the respondent gets is less apparent. I usually asked volunteers why they had come forward, and their reasons were diverse. In several cases, tutors had indicated the personal benefit that an insight into the research process would bring for a final year project. Several individuals said that they liked to help and had previously volunteered to participate in other community studies. Other volunteers had an interest in the research and felt they had some important experiences to share. Jones (1985:52) suggests that research respondents value the possibility that what they say could have some impact on policies affecting them, and may feel rewarded by knowing the interview is important to the researcher. Some individuals volunteered because they had been personally approached by a tutor and felt they were helping that tutor, or in one case, an individual inferred that their tutor had particular reasons for approaching him. Wilson (1996:118) states that willingness to assist depends on the context in which a respondent is asked to take part, and since this can influence responses, is an aspect of validity of the data-collection method. Thus it was important for me to be aware of this background.

My consciousness of the difficulty of gaining an insight into the inner life of a person, understanding meanings, and representing these in an interview text, was heightened by reading the works of Denzin (1970), Riessman (1993), and Usher (1998). Denzin points out that although we speak English, we do not all employ language in the same way, so that an interviewer may make a tacit assumption of understanding, and a volunteer may misunderstand a question and not tell the interviewer what s/he wants to know. Therefore, it is necessary` to check meanings and not assume too quickly that we have understood (Jones, 1985).

The knowledge that one is being observed or interviewed leads to a deliberate monitoring of self so that only certain selves are presented. Unintentionally, an interviewer may convey the kinds of answers they would like to receive and this can create a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Denzin, 1970; Powey and Watts, 1987) where a respondent attempts to present a self that meets these expectations. In a sense, the interviewer and respondent together *create* the data of the research. Each influences the other, and the direction that the data gathering takes is acutely dependent upon what data has already been collected, and in what manner (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:100). "The respective selves of interviewer and respondent cannot be ignored." (Denzin, 1970:137) as the process of interaction creates attitudes and behaviours that did not exist before the interaction, or old attitudes are reshaped.

Usher (1998:19-20) comments that the meanings that volunteers give to past events in their lives are shaped by their perceptions of the present, therefore a text should be regarded as a re-construction or 'presentation', rather than a representation, of the self. Erben (1998:14) points out that individuals have to select from a bewildering array of actions and events, those that can compose a sustainable narrative of themselves. Using Ricoeur's concept of emplotment, Usher summarises the process as imposing an order on experiences, "by their emplotment into a narrative, their significance determined by differential placement and emphasis." (Usher, op cit:24). So, for example, in my study, order was imposed by asking volunteers to recount key steps in their path to HE.

Another problem with oral texts is that there are a number of ways of recounting the past and the story given today may be interpreted differently tomorrow (Page, 1998:92). The interviewee makes a judgement about the interviewer and the kind of definition of themselves and their situation that they want to project. In effect, they decide "which layer of truth they will make accessible to the interviewer" (Powney and Watts, 1987:44-45). Denzin (1970:135) is concerned that a participant can fabricate "tales of self" that belie the actual facts but Riessman (1993:22) accepts that when

talking about their lives, people sometimes lie, forget, exaggerate and get things wrong, since in their narratives, they are revealing truths as they interpret them. Figueroa (1998:151) indicates that it is inevitable that biographical data is selective and involves interpretation, but he rejects the post-modern view that the subject of the autobiographical text is simply a 'story' or 'fiction'.

These authors provided a cautionary note on the limitations of the interview texts and their points were born in mind as I set about analysing and interpreting my interview data. In summary, the meanings and significance attributed to events are informed and shaped by interpretation - by both the subject and myself.

Building trustworthiness

Many writers on qualitative research argue that traditional notions of reliability and standardized procedures for validation do not apply to narrative studies, and alternative criteria include adequacy, authenticity, credibility, coherence, and trustworthiness (see for example, Roberts, 2002). Atkinson (1998) states that trustworthiness and authenticity is key to reliability and validity. Others (see for example, Wolcott, 1990; Boulton & Hammersley, 1996) indicate that the validity of a piece of auto/biographical research derives not from scientific accuracy, but from its credibility and plausibility among an experienced group of peers. The peer group for whom I think this study is of interest and relevance comprises academic colleagues concerned with improving the teaching and learning experience for adult students who have returned to learning in HE. I consider that the persuasiveness and plausibility of my findings derives from the evidence from individual accounts supported by reference to other theoretical and empirical sources. Authors such as Riessman (1993), Maykut and Morehouse (1998), and Wilson (1996) indicate that by making what I did transparent; reflecting on the context and procedures adopted, and their impact on the responses obtained; and describing how interpretations were produced, it will be possible for others to determine the trustworthiness of my work. I have therefore tried to incorporate a

reflexive account throughout those chapters which report on my field research. Also, my primary data of interview tapes and transcriptions can be made available to other researchers on request.

The ultimate safeguard of validity in biographical research is recognisable methodological consistency (Erben, 1998:8). While it is not possible to guarantee balance and fairness, I used techniques advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985:108-9) to provide useful checks and balances, including member checks, multiple data sources, and maintaining field notes. Full interview transcripts were referred back to volunteers for correction and verification, and their consent to use. My interview sample was drawn from volunteers who conformed to predetermined characteristics and the use of multiple sources enabled a certain amount of cross-checking of my data and interpretations. To deal with the impact of interaction on the data, the investigator has four choices: ignore it; devise methodological safeguards to eliminate its effects; take the phenomenon into account as best one can; or fourthly, the best choice according to Lincoln and Guba (ibid:100), is to capitalize on this state of affairs by exploiting opportunities that interaction affords. I chose the latter and attempted to exploit opportunities by building trust and rapport with respondents, and noting instances where interaction appeared to influence the data.

My field notes include several different kinds of records. Firstly, I kept a log of activities such as phone-calls and interviews; secondly, I recorded methodological decisions; and thirdly, I logged personal, reflexive notes about my experience in the field. After an initial meeting with a volunteer, I recorded my first impressions of them, their physical characteristics, and topics that would be useful to follow up in the interview. After the interview, I made general notes on what the interviewee had said, the mood of the interview, and observations that helped me make sense of the interviewee's perspective. Wolcott (1990:128) emphasises the importance of recording as soon as possible after, if not during, an interview, to try to minimise the potential influence of interpretation. Usually, I was able to make brief notes on the same day,

and add further reflections when producing the transcript. These included comments on my role and the perceived influence of my own biases, for example, when interviewing the volunteer who was an ex-policeman. I noted the interview locations and where extraneous factors impacted on the data collection process, for example, pets and children in home settings, seating arrangements, and noise. Also, I found it helpful to include what Lincoln & Guba (op cit:281) call "a cathartic section" in which to reflect on how the interview had gone.

Recording and transcribing interviews

Simons (1981:44-5) summarises the arguments for and against audio tape recording of interviews, concluding that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Tape recording helps to ensure that the data is accurate, and leaves the interviewer free to listen, observe and respond more attentively to the interviewee, as well as make a note of important issues. I used a small Walkman cassette recorder that was relatively unobtrusive and interview tapes were approximately one hour in length. To my knowledge, there was only one instance where the tape recorder inhibited complete honesty, and I only became aware of this because the interviewee volunteered the additional information when the recorder was switched off.

I was aware that transcribing discourse is an interpretive practice (Riessman, 1993:13) and produced full transcriptions following established conventions (see for example, Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Firstly, I prepared a rough draft by transcribing the whole interview verbatim, including hesitations, pauses, and laughs, discourse markers like "you know" and overlapping speech. I then replayed the conversation to check for emphasis, inserted punctuation, and broke monologues into paragraphs. In order to make the text more readable, I included only the first in a series of false starts, 'um's' and 'er's', but otherwise, I did not try to force speech into a written or grammatical frame.

Some tapes were relatively straightforward to transcribe, but for others, it was not always easy to make out what the interviewee said because they had an accent, were quietly spoken or sitting too far from the microphone, or there was background noise. I could usually make intelligent guesses, and I asked interviewees to check and fill in any missing words or phrases. I forwarded transcripts to interviewees as an e-mail attachment, so that they could edit or amend the document and return the final version. As I was aware that volunteers can be concerned to find that their speech is not fluent or grammatical, I gave a reassurance that extracts from the conversation would make any quotations come 'live' for the reader. I asked them to confirm their consent to use quotations to illustrate themes in my thesis. Thus, all transcripts were checked and approved by interviewees.

Untangling knots: data analysis

My approach to data analysis of the interviews was informed by the writings of number of experienced researchers including Taylor and Bogdan (1984) on the phases of analysis; Bogdan and Biklen (1992) on developing coding 'families'; Patton (2002) on cross-case analysis and Boulton and Hammersley (1996). The latter advise that 'grounded theorising' is the most commonly used set of procedures for qualitative analysis, involving the definition of categories through the process of analysis, rather than specifying them at the beginning of the research process. Data analysis, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), should proceed by deconstructing paragraphs into discrete parts or units, and coding and classifying material according to similarities and differences.

Data analysis effectively began with the start of data collection in my first interview and continued as analysis of the initial interviews informed the choice of questions and conduct of subsequent interviews. Gradually, I developed a list of response categories that looked promising as a basis for organising the analysis. These categories were anchored in my research questions and sub-questions, and augmented by knowledge of

previous research on the adult student experience, information from national agencies that audit and accredit learning and teaching in HE, and from my experience as a teacher in HE.

In common with Powney and Watts (1987:159), I found that analysis of conversations about the perceptions and experience of participants is less amenable to fitting into precoded categories of response (advocated by, for example, Miles and Huberman, 1994). Also reassuring was the work on narrative analysis by Riessman (1993:vi) who identified that "some individuals knot together several themes into long accounts that had coherence and sequence defying easy categorisation." Patton's strategy (2002:440) for analysing open-ended interviews through cross-case analysis proved to be most appropriate. This involves using the interview guide or plan as an analytical framework and recognises that answers from different participants are not found in the same place in each interview transcript. Analysis proceeds by grouping together answers from different people to common questions, for example, "What are your main memories of school?"; and analysing different perspectives on central issues, such as the experience of being older than the majority of students.

In the data I identified three broad themes: participants' motivation for HE; positive and negative aspects of the HE experience; and issues that have particular impact on adult learners. Coding categories and 'families' were developed inductively around these themes. Firstly, I closely read the transcripts and made coded annotations in the margins to indicate categories. I looked for significant events or 'epiphanies' and recurring topics and experiences that might indicate patterns. At the first complete reading, I generated categories for any data that appeared relevant to the research focus. Some were relatively obvious categories, but others reflected issues that I had not expected to be prominent. I was, however, aware that I was filtering the data through my own perspectives, imposing a structure on it, and making judgements of what was relevant or irrelevant. As Powney and Watts (op cit:192) indicate, a transcript is an incomplete record of what occurred, and data analysis and presentation involve finding

passages that convey what the interviewer interprets as having been the interviewees' intended meanings at the time of the interview. Thus the interviewer *adds* their view of the interview from their own 'black market' of understandings.

Secondly, I gathered together segments of data relevant to each category and produced an index to the transcripts for each category. Categories were not mutually exclusive, and some segments of data were listed under more than one heading. I then compared and contrasted all the segments assigned to the same category, identified sub-categories and relationships between categories, and reassigned some data segments,. Finally, I read the transcripts again to pick out any relevant data that I had overlooked earlier.

The three broad themes identified in the data provide the structure for the presentation of my findings in chapters 4 and 5, and a wide selection of interview segments is used to illuminate these findings. I believe I have made reasonable inferences on the basis of data, being aware that my presence has helped to shape the data, and that informants may tell you what they think you want to hear. There were many perspectives and experiences that were similar across several participants, and I have given weight to these responses. However, I have not ignored singular or minority responses where they are relevant to the research focus. I am mindful that "the frequency of assertion is not necessarily related to the importance of that assertion" (Guba and Lincoln, 1981:242) and "The best insights sometimes come from a small amount of data." (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:139). I also acknowledge that my ideas and intuition have helped me to see connections and draw meanings. As Erben (1998:9-10) points out, biographical research findings are imaginative constructions, and imagination fills the gaps within, and develops an architecture for, the research data.

Chapter 4: Families, schools and journeys

Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the approach I took to data collection, and analysis revealed three broad themes in the data, namely participants' motivation for HE; positive and negative aspects of the HE experience; and issues that have particular impact on adult learners. This chapter explores the first of these themes, the different motives for learning held by participants, and begins to answer the question, what are lifelong learners seeking from HE? But firstly, I introduce the fifteen individuals who contributed to my research, with biographical data on their family and educational backgrounds. I trace the steps they took on their educational journeys, and examine some of the influences that helped get them to the starting post for HE.

Biographical patterns

The contributors conformed to the principles for inclusion of informants that were set out in Chapter 3. All had a gap of at least 5 years since completing initial full-time education, and were enrolled on a course of HE, ten at undergraduate, and five at postgraduate level. There were five males and ten female students. The youngest participant was aged 28, and in the group as a whole, nine were under 40, and six over 40 years of age. My criteria did not include seeking an ethnically representative group, and those who came forward were all white Europeans, and one was disabled. As a sample, the participants were deliberately drawn from across the spectrum of subjects, and included students of engineering and science, arts and social sciences, business and law, with four enrolled on part-time courses and eleven on full-time courses. At the time that the interviews were undertaken, the largest group were those nearing completion of the first year of their HE programmes, and others were at various stages, as shown in the table overleaf.

Stage of Higher Education	No. of Interviewees	M/F
Year 1 of first degree	6	1/5
Year 2 of first degree	1	1/0
Year 1 of degree & already holding a degree	1	0/1
HE Foundation course	2	2/0
Postgraduate certificate	1	0/1
Doctorate	4	1/3

A short biographical profile of each participant is included at Appendix 1. The format has been adapted from Edwards and Miller (2000) and covers Initial Education, Employment, Further and Higher Education, and Now. I extracted the information from the interview transcripts and my field notes, in order to give a pen-picture of each individual's life history and the stages on their way to current participation in HE. These are only partial pictures and represent my interpretation of their significant biographical data. Pseudonyms have been used to protect individual identities.

Families

Individual life stories show that the encouragement and support of their family was an influential factor in taking up higher education, both on completion of initial education, and on returning to adult education. At the level of initial education, seven participants said that their parents had encouraged them in their education, although only three grew up in families where a parent had attended HE. Four participants progressed straight from initial education to HE, but the remaining eleven had left education, typically at age 16. Usually, parental encouragement had a positive effect, and two female participants said that this helped overcome gender stereotyping. Lisa remembered:

> "My parents were enormously encouraging, My father had quite an enlightened approach to having two daughters and always brought my sister and I up to believe that there was nothing that we couldn't do and the fact of our gender had no bearing on whether we could achieve something or not."

However, parental pressure had negative effects for Ellen who went on to further education because she felt she ought to, and not because she wanted to. Her narrative suggested that she felt she had disappointed her father who had been to university. Only now that she was achieving success in her degree course was she beginning to throw off a lack of esteem from earlier educational failure.

Other narratives reveal that lack of parental encouragement to do well at school and lack of role models to follow were now seen as drawbacks. Four participants who felt they had under-achieved at school, said they had not been given parental support at important times in their initial education. Danny and Hans had been discouraged from going on to higher education by successful fathers and initially they followed in their fathers' footsteps. Danny recalled:

> "My parents weren't particularly pushy towards university, in fact they were - my father was completely anti it. "You don't want to go there", you know, - he was a successful businessman, owned his own company and failed every exam in his life sort of thing, and he said that's not important, what's important is knowing people and doing what you like."

Judy also had parents who were in business, and she felt that the idea of progression to HE was probably not raised because no-one in the family had gone to HE. She said, "I wasn't discouraged, they would have paid for me to go if it had been necessary. I just didn't ever think about doing it."

The narratives confirm the important role of 'significant others' (Courtney, 1992) and supportive relationships in encouraging learning. Most participants commented on the importance of the backing of their families, including partners, children, and parents, to their decision to return to education as adults. In four cases, one female and three males, participants had given up employment to pursue full-time courses, and there had

been a family decision that partners would work to financially support the family. Two of these male participants were married to graduates and had agreed to become "househusbands" combining studying with childcare while their partner pursued her career. Several participants mentioned the help they received with childcare from parents, and in two cases, single parents were living with their parents. Their narratives also indicated that participation in HE had a great impact on family life and these issues will be addressed in Chapter 5.

Memories of school

Participants were asked about their main memories of school, and their responses were pretty evenly split between positive memories and dislike of school. Those who were positive mentioned social reasons, and only occasionally referred to the academic aspects of school. Reasons for dislike of school were varied and included dissatisfaction with the curriculum, not mixing well with other pupils, and bullying in two cases. Those who disliked school also felt they had under-achieved. It is noteworthy that in total, ten participants felt they had achieved less than they were intellectually capable of, because they were unhappy at school or at home, didn't try hard enough, or were easily distracted from their studies. One of the ten, Ben, consciously did the minimum because he knew that regardless of school qualifications, he would have to pass an entrance exam for his chosen vocation in the police force.

The narratives of four female participants revealed the role of teachers in encouraging or discouraging educational achievement. Two participants who were encouraged by teachers attended single-sex girls' schools with an academic focus. Carol grew up in the 1960s and recalled the positive influence of her headmistress:

> "I did go to a very traditional, girls' grammar school. The headmistress was
> very strict but she did drill it into us that you had to work to the best of your
> ability. Her argument was that if you had the ability to achieve, and you didn't,

71

you were putting somebody lower down out of a job. You had to do the best you can, so that those that couldn't achieve as much as you could get those jobs. That was her argument and I remember that argument, because it made sense to me."

By contrast, Lynn and Maria went to mixed comprehensive schools where they felt they did not get sufficient attention from their teachers. Lynn recalled that she felt her surname was blacklisted by teachers after her sister was expelled, and so she didn't have much hope of success at school. Maria's account suggested that her teachers and parents saw her education as less important than her brother's; the following extract illustrates her recollection of being "written off":

"I've got a twin brother. Sometimes it was unpleasant because we had the same teachers and he's quite bright academically, so I got compared quite a lot to Christopher. They did it explicitly as well. When my Mum and Dad went to open evenings they used to talk about Christopher when they should have been talking about me which was difficult."

Some participants recalled playing truant and the adverse impact this had on their progress and achievement at school. Sally's story revealed a spiral effect of education not being supported at home, missing school, and then finding it difficult to settle back in, and ultimately dropping out at the age of 14. Interestingly, the pattern of her difficulties in making friends at school was later repeated when she returned to HE. Sally recalled her experience at school:

"Mixed memories. I did enjoy school, I enjoyed the learning. I didn't enjoy the social part so much, which is probably what put me off education in the end really. Em, I was allowed - my Mum - I was the youngest of five and by the time I was around, I guess my Mum wanted to sort of, make up for being a working mother, so I was allowed to be off school quite a lot, which any child

72

probably jumps at the opportunity. The thing was, when I went back to school each time, it was really hard to sort of, be with a friend because they'd moved on to another friend and I'd missed a lot of work, so I guess that affected my schooling really."

These stories enabled me to see the significance of family background and experiences of initial education to participants' attitudes and motivation for learning. In a few cases, individuals who had enjoyed learning and grown up in a home environment that encouraged education, found it natural to progress straight from initial to higher education, and have now returned to HE. More commonly in my sample, individuals discontinued their education, and many had memories and anxieties about education and their individual level of attainment. In the next section, I shall focus on the latter group and why they were prompted as adults to take their first steps to HE.

Stepping stones

The majority of my research participants entered higher education for the first time as adult learners. Five individuals returned firstly to further education to gain qualifications, four individuals participated in Access courses, and two individuals undertook a Foundation course as a pre-entry requirement for their degree courses. The narratives of Anthony, Jim, Judy, Maria and Sally suggest that they already had HE in their sights, and they saw those courses as stepping stones. The others just took one step at a time.

The most common reason given for returning to education was boredom and seeking an intellectual challenge, in some cases related to wanting to improve skills and job prospects. Anthony, Danny, Katie and Ellen said they were in undemanding jobs, felt they were not using their brains, and wanted more challenge. This position was illustrated graphically by Anthony:

"I was in the traditional dead end jobs going absolutely nowhere - what propelled me was the horrible prospect of painting white lines."

So, Anthony obtained a small grant, went to college full-time and completed 'A' levels, picking subjects he was interested in, as distinct from the sciences he had disliked doing when he dropped out of school. 'Wanting to do something different' was a theme for several participants. Judy recalled being bored at work and encountering a difficult task for which she lacked the statistical tools, and felt that there must be a way to prove her argument. However, the real catalyst was the break-up of her marriage which prompted her to seek change and so she decided to go back to college to study, as an end in itself. Similarly for Maria, the turning point was having a baby and reflecting that she was unhappy in her job and did not want to return to a corporate environment:

"I think you change after you've had children. You can tolerate things more I think, if it's just you to consider and then when someone else comes along, you have to think, am I really happy doing this? When I come home from work eventually again, I want to make sure that I'm in the right frame of mind. That I'm happy, you know, that I'm happy in myself."

Including Maria, there were six participants where 'epiphanies' (see Denzin, 1989) or critical events prompted reflection and the decision to return to education. Sally was in a job that wasn't mentally challenging, but like Judy, the split up from her husband caused her to think about going back to college to improve her skills. For Jim, voluntary redundancy gave him an opportunity and financial support to go to college to do GCSEs. Ben was faced with early retirement from a job he loved, and was bored at home, so he started studying 'A' levels as a hobby to get himself out of the house. Hans had an accident at work that left him with a permanent disability. Like Jim, he had always had it in the back of his head that he would like to "start again", and the change of circumstances prompted him to look to education.

Hans experienced some frustration that he had been required to complete an Engineering Foundation Course before commencing a degree in computing engineering. He accepted that he needed to brush up on mathematics but said he had not learnt anything new in computing classes and could not see the relevance of studying other subjects. Hans explained:

"I had to do electrics, electronics, mechanical science, engineering principles - but I do not need these subjects unless they start building computers out of reinforced concrete."

While Hans had been bored "going back to basics", Danny, who had 3 'A' levels from 20 years earlier, was glad to do the Foundation Year because it gave him confidence for entry to the first year of the degree in ship science. The implication of these two stories is that more attention could be given to assessing and guiding applicants on the preparation they need, and that the content of Engineering Foundation Courses could be customized.

The four individuals who completed Access courses were Katie, Maria, Lynn, and Sally. They arrived from different directions. Lynn was enjoying being a classroom assistant at her daughter's infants' school, and began to reflect that she could just as well be the teacher. She heard about the Access course at the local college, and attended a six week taster "just up the road" where she met others who were "in the same boat", and gained confidence to get back into learning. Lynn told Katie about the course. Katie was bored at work and feeling she needed to better herself by getting some qualifications. Hearing that Lynn was going to do the Access course, her reaction was, "if she can do it, so can I". The narratives of these two individuals were further evidence of the power of the example of current colleagues and friends.

Maria and Sally were looking to improve their job prospects and sought advice on educational opportunities from their local college. Maria wanted to learn skills that would allow her to work in a different area, perhaps a voluntary organisation. The college advised that probably the best route was to attend the Access course and see how things went from there. Sally didn't have a plan other than to maximise her employment prospects when she learnt about the Access course and the idea of going to university appealed. Nobody in her family had pursued HE and her narrative suggests she had regrets about dropping out of school at 14. HE offered a way to prove herself and achieve a better life for her children.

Access courses - two steps forward, one step back

Access courses are usually schemes arranged between a university and local FE colleges, whereby courses are accredited for admission into specified undergraduate programmes. They are targeted at specific groups who lack traditional entry qualifications for HE, and normally last one year. The four Access course participants in my study had positive and negative reflections on their experiences. Katie and Lynn, who attended Totton College together, were largely positive. They found it helpful to have the support of a friend both on the course and at the point of moving up to HE, and the Access course experience had given them confidence and a head start. Lynn spoke about the benefits of familiar faces in helping to overcome the fears of commencing in HE:

"If I hadn't gone to Access first, or even if I'd gone to Access and I'd gone on my own, I think it would've been a bit of a shock, but because I went from Access and took half the people with me (laughs) - I mean, I've got ones from Access there who are actually on my degree, - I think there was something like twelve to sixteen - which doesn't sound huge but it is when you're first starting - that came with us, so it meant that although I was absolutely petrified when

we first got there, there were familiar faces and I think that did make a difference".

Katie had found writing essays quite hard but overall, the Access course experience had been good preparation for university. Sally found her Access course extremely challenging particularly for self discipline, but she gained a sense of achievement from being able to prove that she could complete it. Maria valued the emotional support that was provided but overall, did not feel adequately prepared for HE. The college had indicated that the first year of the degree would be easier than the Access course but she was finding it tough. Maria said:

"I don't know whether it's because of the nature of the programme that I'm doing, possibly that I find it very tough, and a lot of us have. Indeed it's nothing like Access. We had no additional reading or - Access it was just, you studied in the day, you got your assignments in and that was it. No reading, not to the extent of the reading that I'm doing now. So it was a bit of a shock. It wasn't anything like I envisaged."

Maria's narrative suggests that her difficulties arose from inadequate advice and guidance on choosing a degree programme that would be appropriate to her interests and aptitudes. She recalled having to choose her degree subjects shortly after starting the Access course and now felt this was too early before she had enough information:

"It was very quick, the process was very quick. They didn't really - I mentioned about social work perhaps - she said all right OK, then you need to be doing Sociology and some Psychology, Human Development. It was very quick. I know you had to have it clear in mind what you were doing before you started but I think, really, picking the degree courses that early was detrimental really."

When Maria subsequently changed her mind and wanted to do a more scientific subject, her options were limited as she was not taking Maths. Lynn also felt that the range of subjects covered in her Access programme limited her choice of degree programme. Although she was able to do a GCSE in Maths while on the Access course, she found that the course did not do Maths to the level required to study the subject at university. It appears to be easier to gain access to non-science disciplines. This was also reported in the Warwick study where science tutors said that unlike in the Arts, one year Access courses could not give the same science background as two year 'A' level courses. Bourgeois *et al* (1999:105) remark that this attitude betrays an assumption that scientific knowledge has a higher status than other forms of knowledge.

In common with Maria, Sally's narrative reveals the need for better advice and guidance on choosing a degree programme. She sought advice from a tutor when she was unsure which of two degrees to follow and it appears too much weight was put on employability rather than taking a more holistic view of her needs and circumstances. The consequence was that Sally made an inappropriate choice, failed to complete her first year, and came close to dropping out of HE. Sally recalled:

> "I went to my tutor at Access, and she said, "Go to that one. If you can get into the main campus, you'll be more employable. New College degrees are not very appreciated in the workforce." and that put me off straight away and I just, from her words, I thought I'm not going to New College; it just put me off completely. Em, so I went there, I tried the course and didn't get on, and wished I'd gone where everybody else had gone who were having a good time and are now in the end of their second year."

The experiences narrated by Access course participants provide an insight into the needs of adults returning to HE. Adult students may not be aware of their intellectual strengths nor the range of degree possibilities, and need advice and guidance in making

choices. Their needs are quite distinct from those of school-leavers and help needs to be tailored, perhaps making use of a range of self-assessment and psychometric tests. Care is needed to avoid closing down an individual's options too early, and Maths provision within Access appears to be an issue. Therefore, Access course providers need comprehensive information on which subjects are pre-requisites for certain degree programmes. As the stories show, individuals vary in their readiness to make degree course decisions, and it may not be appropriate for adult students who have been out of education for many years, to make degree course applications early in the academic year to fit in with the UCAS timetable. UCAS figures indicate a need for better information and advice for HE applicants in general; 18 per cent of students drop out of HE and at least another 20 per cent who finish degrees believe they chose the wrong course, suggesting that applicants could be more informed when making degree choices (*Guardian*, 2002).

Encouraging influences

Participants' stories reveal a range of influences on their decision to take up HE including the attitudes of families, experiences in other areas of the education system, the impact of advice and encouragement from tutors and friends, and of their first impressions of HE. Earlier in this chapter, I have discussed how family attitudes, school and Access course experiences can influence the choices that individual make. In this section, I draw on individual narratives to illustrate the encouraging influences of further education tutors and of positive initial contacts with HE.

Katie, Ellen and Ben spoke of the positive influence of their further education tutor in raising their awareness of HE, instilling confidence and encouraging them to continue to HE. Their narratives suggested that prior to taking up HE, they had no clear goals or ambitions. Ben was doing 2 'A' levels to relieve the boredom of early retirement when one of his college tutors asked what he was going to do at the end, and suggested HE. Ben warmed to this idea as he had "got the academic bug", and made enquiries at

Southampton Institute where he was "over the moon" to receive an offer of a place. Encouraged again by his tutor, he contacted the University, and after passing an interview and written exam, got a conditional offer of two Bs. This gave him a new goal in life, he recalled:

"So then the goal posts were changed. I had to run down to the College and explain to my tutors that OK, the messing about, and the talking and the socialising perhaps, had to take a back seat. I really needed 2 Bs to go on to university, and I got them, I got those 2 Bs."

Ellen also said she gained the idea of doing a degree from a tutor who talked enthusiastically about HE. Her story suggested that HE offered the chance to escape the treadmill of an unfulfilling job:

"On the counselling course, because the chap - he'd obviously got his degree and an MA, I think he had - he talked a lot about going on to higher education. And I thought, yea, this sounds great but its not possible for me - you know, how do you finance yourself and all that sort of stuff? And then getting really peed off with the job, I thought something's got to be done. So, I applied actually to do social work at Southampton and Bournemouth and put the course that I'm doing now as my second or third option."

The significant event that gave Ellen the confidence to take up HE was the personal contact with, and encouragement from the admissions tutor. On receipt of Ellen's application form, he rang her up, said the course would be appropriate for someone with her experience, and invited her in for an informal chat. Ellen said:

"It wasn't my first choice - I guess Geoff giving me that personal attention, I thought, oh, somebody's quite interested in me, you know."

Danny's story also showed the impact of a positive initial contact with HE. He was in a job with no challenge, considering various options when his mother-in-law suggested HE. He said, "We all sort of, giggled and laughed" but never-the-less he contacted the University, and was pleased with the response, and the ease with which he gained a place. In contrast, Jim's first contact almost put him off HE. He described an interview in which he was overwhelmed by the barrage of the admissions tutor's questions, and wanting time to think about his answers. Jim related how he struggled and felt out of his depth:

> "I felt, to be honest, that the interview was scary. I can remember coming here and seeing Dr. such-and-such and I thought, I'm way, way out of my league here. The intellect was bounding out of the chair, and I was just struggling to answer what she wanted to hear, and how I impressed her to give me a place, I don't know, but I did. But obviously the intellect was so powerful and I remember walking home being frightened by it all, thinking I could just never ever achieve anything here."

Jim's narrative reveals a lack of personal confidence in his educational ability and although he was offered a place, he decided to defer entry for a year and complete a further 'A' level. I concluded that the interaction with the admissions tutor had left a mark on him as he returned to it later in the interview. He felt that tutors should appreciate that a different approach is needed when dealing with mature students who are not as accustomed as school-leavers to handling academic questioning. Jim said that the first encounter with HE should be more welcoming and less daunting:

> "I think the most important thing is the first experience at university. As I said before, I thought the interview was daunting; it was extremely frightening for me. I think if you're a mature student and coming back, haven't been learning for very long, or you've done something and come back in, it's that initial experience of coming into a room and being addressed by a PhD doctor on a

certain subject. I found that really frightening, didn't feel at ease at all. It was something that really bugged me at the time. It could have put me off; it could have totally put me off even applying. I spoke to other students who had different people interview them, and they were exactly the same, they found the whole thing frightening. They felt they were jumping from one hole into another, and getting deeper and deeper into a mire and feeling as they came out that they'd actually blown it, they hadn't got a chance. And I feel that somehow, that's got to be changed a little bit, you've got to make it more welcoming, much more welcoming, really."

These extracts highlight some areas where steps could be taken to present a more positive picture to mature students who aspire to HE. FE college tutors are potential ambassadors for HE in the community, and it would be helpful if they had more dialogue with HE admissions tutors to ensure that adult students receive relevant information on what to expect in HE. Also, it is important that the first contact a mature student makes with HE gives encouragement and confidence to continue with their application. The "gatekeepers" in HE need to consider whether their approach takes sufficient account of diverse educational backgrounds and motives, and whether they are likely to be seen as welcoming to mature students.

The inner voice

The narratives reveal the very different journeys and influences that participants had experienced. They had usually taken up HE at a time in their life when they had spent significant periods in employment and also, in many cases, married and started a family. Generalisation is difficult, especially since Ricoeur (1984) advises that narrative imposes on the events of the past a form that they do not really have. Thus when telling me their stories, participants were constructing a version of their life which was linear and relatively neat and tidy, unlike real life. To help understand the paths that people follow, Goodson and Sikes (2001) offer the concept of scripts. Their

theory is that each of us comes into the world with a social script of expectations, given by society, which some find acceptable and live as planned. For others, the script is more oppressive, and their life may be lived in an attempt to break free. I found this idea useful as a means of gaining further insight into participants' lives, and generalising about their motivations for HE and the difficulties they had encountered.

Four participants, Pat, Lisa, Carol, and Martha, born into middle class professional families, had accepted and lived their script by progressing through the education system into a professional world. Ellen's family had such expectations of her, but her failure to equal her father's academic success had left voices at the back of her mind telling her she was not good enough. She was now striving to fulfil her script. The majority of participants were breaking free from their script; by undertaking HE, they were doing something that had not been expected of them. Ben, for example, had lived his script for most of his life; he recalled a photograph at age 3 when he was dressed as a policeman, and that was all he wanted in life until forced to take early retirement. Danny and Hans had lived the script that their fathers had written for them in their early careers but now they were realising their own dreams and ambitions through HE.

Goodson and Sikes (2001) indicate that scripts of class, gender and race are often oppressive. The stories of several participants could be seen as attempts to deconstruct a 'working class' script and achieve a better life for themselves and their families. Anthony was a 'working class' boy who got to grammar school in the 1960s and his narrative reveals similarities to the "scholarship boy" script described by Hoggart (cited by Goodson and Sikes:78). His problems of adjustment which continued well into adult life could be attributed to having pulled away from his original culture, but not having the 'intellectual equipment' to join the 'declassed' professionals. His passion for books and intellectual activity and pursuit of HE qualifications could be interpreted as giving him the sense of belonging that he craved. Similarly Jim's pursuit of HE appeared to be motivated by a need for self esteem and acceptance amongst his friends and peers. He spoke feelingly about the class system in education and how as a

working class boy, he was streamed through secondary modern school. His narrative suggested he was now breaking free of his script.

Espoused motives

In the interviews, I asked participants what had attracted them to HE, and what they were hoping to achieve from their programme. In most cases, there was no *one* reason, but they had a complex range of motives. Also, some individuals said that the experience of HE had altered, often widened, what they hoped to achieve. For example, Lynn had started with an ambition to be a teacher, but now she was contemplating studying for a doctorate. Individuals were not always consistent throughout their narratives, probably because their recollection of their motives when they first contemplated HE were subject to re-interpretation with hindsight. Lisa appeared to justify her perhaps, curious decision to do a medical related degree in her late 40s by recalling that her scientific interests had been suppressed at school. Ricoeur (1984) noted that in telling their story, individuals have an opportunity to create an identity that they judge is appropriate in the context.

The motives that participants espoused revealed a strong emphasis on vocational purposes as well as personal self-fulfilment, which were not mutually exclusive. The remaining sections of this chapter present my distillation of their motives for undertaking HE.

A life less ordinary
Personal fulfilment was a driver for five participants who wanted an alternative to their existing life. Maria and Ellen spoke about the past in terms of "ending up in places" and "bimbling", and how good it felt to have left a job they disliked to now do something they had chosen for themselves. Judy had been in a secure job for a number of years and had family responsibilities. Her narrative suggests a free spirit was trying

to escape and do something different, and HE was meeting her personal needs for fulfilment. Judy explained:

> "If I had to sort of, sum it up in one phrase, why on earth did I do this because I'm not materially motivated - it's not that - and I just think it's because I wanted a life less ordinary was my little thing I came up with on the way. Just to do something to throw it all up in the wind and see what happened, you know."

Intellectual nourishment

Four participants indicated that a primary reason for their involvement with HE was intellectual challenge. Anthony, Carol, Pat and Martha who were doing postgraduate qualifications, talked about enjoying studying and learning new things. This was consistent with a 1975 study that found postgraduates' reasons for study were as much to do with subject interest or personal development as with employment (Rudd and Simpson, 1975, cited in Tight, 1991). More recently, Brennan *et al* (2000) have identified that after 40, interest-related reasons for study rather than employment reasons, become increasingly important. The narratives of Anthony and Martha revealed that they gained intellectual stimulation that was not provided in their everyday employment, as illustrated in the two extracts below.

Anthony explained:

> "It's a kind of nourishment for want of a better term, really for me. And much of our work doesn't really give me - we read a lot and we turn stuff over but it's all bits of paper that go here and there and er, I'm not particularly attached to it. I'm not motivated by owning lots of things. I seem to get my sources from this sort of endeavour."

Martha said:

> "I don't really see the Ph.D. as like a qualification, I just see it as quite similar
> to the research I was doing in the past, although in an academic way rather than
> - well, actually that was another reason why I wanted to do the Ph.D. because
> where I was working, it wasn't in a particular academic way, it was very much
> responding to government contracts and you might be working on one thing in
> one month and something in the next, and I actually wanted to pursue
> something with a bit more depth and a bit more academic rigour than the stuff
> we were doing."

Proving to myself

Six participants drew motivation from the personal sense of achievement that degree
level study was giving to them. For Maria, Ellen, Lynn and Jim, there was a strong
sense of making up for being "written off" at an earlier age but knowing deep down
that they had ability. Also for Judy and Sally, there was a warm glow from the
prospect of gaining a HE qualification that no-one else in their family had achieved.
Judy valued the objective assessment of her ability that a PhD would give compared to
more subjective judgements at her place of employment; she reasoned:

> "Other people I know at work, your character comes in to play when they're
> making a judgement of you and feeding it back. I want a judgement of me
> from somebody else who's unbiased, not influenced by character or personality,
> who will just look at the work on a piece of paper and ask questions, no
> smiling, not getting to know you sort of thing, just that, and then make a
> judgement on that. And then, I think that will be a true judgement that I can
> put my own self assessment against. I think that's why I want it really."

In my head I have a plan

Eleven participants indicated that gaining a qualification that would help them in their chosen vocation featured strongly in their motivation for HE, and ten were following applied courses in health related subjects, education and applied social sciences, engineering, and business. Of the remaining participants, only two stated that material motives were not important to them. Pat said that it would be nice to do something away from her job but she didn't have the time, having had to work and support three children as a single parent. Among those who commenced their programmes with a clear vocational purpose, several had worked out a plan for achieving their goal. Danny always wanted to be an engineer and was prepared to spend up to 5 years in full-time study up to Masters level to achieve his ambition, as the following extract shows:

> "In my head I have a plan of what's going to happen, and to a certain extent we sort of, have forecast our life if you can do that, accordingly. Five years here, 5 years working my way up the ladder suitably, so that you know, at that point, we should be able to - my wife should be able to stand down a little bit from the job she does, if she wants to. She's got a choice then, but for the moment, for the next 10 years, we're basically going to have to rely on her to keep things running until I can get back up to speed again."

Hans had similar long-term plans and intended to pursue a degree in computing engineering then specialise in nanotechnology. He too, was reliant on his wife's earnings and their savings. Ben's long term plan was to become a criminal law barrister which, following his law degree, would entail a further year of study and then a 12 month pupilage. Ben explained:

> "As for when I decided to be a barrister, I think it was probably before I started at University. Once I decided that I wanted to go on, I had to have a fixed goal.

I couldn't just get a Law degree and then think, right, what am I going to do with it?"

Two participants intended that their current programme would help them in their present job. Anthony had his manager's support because a PhD would develop analytical tools of use in his job. Pat's employers were supporting her business course because the work-based assignments would be useful in the workplace, for example a strategic plan for her work section.

It's a necessity to have a piece of paper

Several participants mentioned that an aspect of their motivation for HE was that experience alone was not sufficient to enter or continue in their chosen career path, and it was important to gain degree certification. Carol who was doing an education degree, and Ellen who hoped to enter employment in the voluntary sector, expressed such sentiments, as shown in the extracts below.

Carol explained:

> "I felt after I'd done the MBA, I felt for a long time that I'd have to do a doctorate because I was working in higher education - if you're working in higher education you really have to be seen to be doing that development. And, I thought, well, I wanted to do it anyway because I think I'd become a bit of a study junkie, then."

Ellen said:

> "You hear people say, it's a necessity to a certain extent now to have a piece of paper - that's how people are going to be measured now and in the future."

Anthony and Martha mentioned that having a PhD would be helpful to achieve their professional career aspirations. Certification was of particular importance to Hans who had been unable to obtain proof of qualifications gained in East Germany, and was repeating some of his education in the UK. However, certification alone was not always sufficient, and six participants indicated that the reputation attached to the institution or course was an influential factor in their choice. Consequently, several had undertaken mainstream university courses rather than courses at for example, New College, which is intended to provide for the needs of mature students. Lisa had similarly decided on a degree in podiatry which she called the "Rolls Royce approach" rather than a college diploma in chiropody because a degree offered a more comprehensive training and qualification.

There are no stabilities out there

A final group of motives for HE studies concerned a need to preserve employability and security, with seven participants mentioning that this had featured in their decision-making. Anthony's job security was not currently under threat but if forced to look for another job, he felt that a higher degree would help get him on a "different stack for the interview". He reasoned:

> "There are no stabilities out there, and er, you can't really look around for advice. So a bit of me is thinking, it's hard to know how or if I'll keep working or keep going through my fifties. A hell of a lot of people I know haven't, and you fall down the snake and you can't get up, and it wouldn't surprise me if that happened. It's a real worry because I've got young children to take care of."

Lisa had previously experienced redundancy and unemployment and gained comfort from the prospect of graduating with a skill that is much in demand. Four other participants spoke about HE opening doors, enabling them to look for employment in a wider range of fields than previously, thus giving them security. As well as the goal of proving to herself that she could achieve a degree, Sally spoke about a degree enabling her to get a better job than she would otherwise, and gaining independence:

89

"My main goal is to actually complete three years and achieve, you know to get the degree, because I've never, ever stuck at anything and that is the biggest challenge for me, is to actually complete something. And obviously what it would bring me hopefully is independence from the state, from ex-partner, from anybody. Hopefully my children will get what they need and want from me, and I'll be able to do that."

In summary, on the basis of my sample, it appears that adult learners are more likely to be located in discipline areas that have a vocational focus, but their motives are broader, spanning a need for personal challenge and achievement, and longer term considerations of employability and family security. Thus, in terms of what these lifelong learners are seeking from HE, there is no simple prescription. HE meets a wide range of needs for adult learners at all levels from first degree to PhD. In the next chapter, I shall describe those elements of HE that the research participants found to be positive or negative, or had particular impact on them as adults, and this will reveal further dimensions of the needs of lifelong learners.

Chapter 5: Deconstructing experience

Summary

A main strand of my research was to explore to what extent the learning experience in higher education is meeting the needs of lifelong learners. In the interviews, I asked participants how it felt returning to learning in HE as an adult student, and about the support they were receiving. I invited them to tell me what they liked about HE, and about any obstacles, and how they had dealt with them. The narratives revealed both positive and negative aspects of the HE experience and a range of issues that had particular impact on adult learners. Among the positive aspects were interaction with tutors and the subjects studied, while the negatives included the initial contact with the HE environment and concerns about assessment and feedback. All the research participants lived off-campus and had other roles in addition to being a student, and their stories illustrated the demands, compromises and sacrifices that they made to accommodate these multiple roles. This chapter presents my findings on the nature of the adult experience of HE and suggests changes to address difficulties that participants encountered.

It's hard work but I like it

All participants made positive comments about their current HE programmes and none gave any impression that educational difficulties were likely to lead to them dropping out. Many talked about enjoying learning, although pointing out the need for dedication and hard work. Several mentioned wider gains like friendships established, gaining self-confidence and a feeling of going somewhere in life, and some said they would recommend HE to others. A number of participants indicated that they gained more out of HE by being an adult learner because at 18, they did not have the self-discipline or maturity to cope with study and they were now able to draw on their life experience. However, several found that it was hard returning to learning as an adult.

Anthony, who was on his third 'bite' of HE, and doing a doctorate in his late forties said, "Its tough. The mountain gets harder every time." Other narratives reveal difficulties in gauging the level of work required, and in getting structure and routine into a new life as a student, as well as the complications arising from family responsibilities, which are discussed later in this chapter.

It was scary to begin with

In Chapter 4, I identified that first encounters with HE were often daunting. Individual stories were not dissimilar to those reported in the Warwick study (Bourgeois *et al*, 1999:105), where students described the admissions process as the first hurdle, and then finding the courage to enter a large, and for some, alienating educational institution, as the second hurdle to be overcome. Participants' experience of induction to the HE environment was more often remembered with pain than pleasure. Typical comments were that it was a big shock, and nerve-racking with so many people and the challenge of finding your way around such a big place. Several participants said they had panicked and worried that they would not be able to cope compared to others in their cohort, as illustrated by the following two interview extracts.

Ellen recalled:

> "The first week you could have blown me - you know, you could have said, what do you want to do? and I would have said, I want to get out of here. But, yea, the first week was just horrendous, I think, horrendous, thinking I'm not good enough, I haven't got the qualifications because the majority of people around me had Access courses. And I just thought, they've done sociology, psychology, all the subjects that we were going to study and I thought, they're way ahead of me. And I thought, I'm not going to cope with this."

Danny remembered:

> "It was scary to begin with, very scary. And 20 minutes into the first lesson, I won't tell you, I was all for standing up going, huh huh huh, this is crazy, and what am I thinking about? You know, walking out. But now, virtually a year down the line, I'm enjoying it, I'm enjoying learning."

Danny's confidence plummeted when the class were given a task that he struggled with at school: he thought that everyone around him was "whistling through" because they were 18 or 19 year-olds with Maths fresh in their memory. Fortunately, with the reassurance of a supportive tutor, he didn't give up, and was able to overcome what had initially seemed like an insurmountable hurdle. But, the induction experience is a crucial point at which individuals may drop out if they feel out of their depth or their initial impression is negative. As an example of good induction practice, two participants mentioned that a friendly and comfortable atmosphere at New College helped them to settle in quickly.

Being around intelligent people

Among the positive aspects of their experience, a number of participants mentioned the subject they were studying, mental stimulation, and helpful tutors. Anthony, Suzy, Jim and Lynn commented on the buzz they got from being close to "great brains" with expertise in their subjects. Lynn described one lecturer as "one of those sort of, God-like people that just astounded most of us, he was just so good at speaking and everything" and Jim said:

> "The first time I went into a lecture hall was fabulous. I was struck by the high intellect of the tutors (...) a professor could come in and he could talk for an hour and a half without notes - give a framework and he gives points. It's so fascinating that anybody, I mean its spellbinding (...) I'm very impressed with

93

the University. I'm impressed by the people I meet and I enjoy being around people who are very intelligent and if you like, soaking up what they can offer."

Suzy observed that she found the older members of staff in their '40s and '50s to be wonderful, but less so the younger staff who were more pragmatic, competitive and striving to get their work published. Ellen's story reveals instances where learners are easily discouraged by tutors who lack empathy. She described one tutor's first talk to her class as aggressive and not encouraging to students who are new to the ways of HE. Subsequently, she went to tutors for help with the structure of her essays but was disappointed when they did not engage with her problems at what she saw as a relevant academic level. Ellen said:

"I've already been to one lecturer to ask about my essays, the structure of it and stuff. The first thing I remember she said, "Oh that's quite straightforward Ellen", or "that's quite easy, Ellen", and I'm thinking, well that's not really helping me, to come out with comments like that."

Ellen's difficulties may have been due to her lack of preparation for HE. As an earlier extract from her narrative shows, she felt inferior to her peers who had progressed from an Access course. By contrast, Lynn who had completed an Access course, and was studying a different degree, said that she had found the tutors very helpful and encouraging. Her narrative indicates that she went to see tutors frequently for guidance, but she took a very different approach to Ellen in that she would tell tutors what she was planning to do, in order to get their confirmation that she was on the right track, and thus she gained confidence.

Study skills

The narratives of Ellen, Maria, Ben and Danny indicate that adult students are likely to need help in improving their study skills. Their problems included making too many notes, a mental blockage when committing ideas to paper, not reading quickly enough, and feeling they were not making effective use of study time. They had not found formal study skills sessions very helpful; they wanted discipline-based help from subject experts who are more able to diagnose specific weaknesses and alternative strategies. Ben and Danny experienced particular difficulties with exam techniques.

Ben recalled working hard in the library, reading around the subject whenever there were no formal classes, and treating studying like a 9 to 5 job, and only discovering he had problems with study skills when he failed his mock exams. From discussion with tutors, he learned that the problem with his exam technique was that he was presenting a black-and-white answer rather than arguing a case. The study skills department pointed out there were other ways of studying, but because he hadn't experienced anything similar at school, he hadn't realised that it was important to use different methods of learning including discussion with peers. Fortunately he was able to retrieve the situation before the end of year exams, but he was amazed at how much the onus was put on him to acquire appropriate skills.

Danny described his first major exam as "an absolute nightmare". He felt that tutors may not appreciate that as mature students haven't done exams for a long time, it is bound to be a stressful experience. This could have been partly alleviated by setting mock exams in a similar form to the end of year exams. Danny had asked for help with revision but felt it was difficult for the tutors to make a special case for a small number of mature students.

I was surprised that only a few participants mentioned problems with taking examinations. I had assumed that adult students would find it difficult to sit and write

for 3 hours but on checking this out with some interviewees, I found that this presented no trouble as they wrote out assignments before word-processing. Ben did express difficulties with extended periods of handwriting, preferring to work on his laptop, and therefore planned to take final year options that were assessed by coursework and a dissertation.

Expectations of tutors

Individuals had differing expectations of their lecturers and tutors, and sometimes they were critical of the attitudes and approaches they encountered. The opinions and experiences of two participants, Carol and Pat, who were working in education and training organisations, were pertinent to my research as people from the field of education often return to HE as adults. Reflecting on her experience of several HE programmes, Carol said that teaching staff didn't understand enough about how learning takes place. She felt it was important to help a person to find out what type of learner they are, so that together, the tutor and student could manage the learning process. While she had found her own way of "surviving", she was critical of the "traditional" type of tutor who gave out material and let students get on with it. Maria echoed Carol's views in that she was shocked when given her first piece of work, to be told, "go away and find out", although she subsequently realised that in HE, students are expected to study more independently. These stories illustrate that adult students have different learning styles and readiness for self-directed learning as identified by Brookfield (1986).

Pat observed big variations in the experience and ability of the lecturers on her part-time postgraduate business course, who mainly worked in business and taught in a part-time capacity. Pat recounted a story about a new lecturer who was aggressive and not accustomed to an interactive style of teaching, and was using someone else's presentation, with which he was not totally conversant. The class had been given the presentation notes in advance, and the lecturer was reading them out to the class which

Pat thought was not a good use of time for busy adults. Her story highlights that participants usually want an opportunity to discuss different viewpoints and the practical application of theory. A learning experience that does not include these elements usually fails to meet the needs of adult learners (Brookfield, ibid).

When things go wrong

Sometimes, individual problems went beyond interactions with tutors, and study skills issues. The narratives of two participants reveal personal difficulties arising from ill-health and being on the wrong course, and the student support systems that helped them through their crises. Lisa suffered ill-health which was initially diagnosed as stress and exhaustion in reaction to life events, but after our interview, was found to be diabetes. She was surprised to find that staff and fellow students were enormously supportive, which she attributed to being on a course in the caring profession. She recounted how she had been feeling unwell but there was nowhere to sit, so she asked if she could sit in the staffroom. A tutor gave her a drink, spent time talking to her, and then sent her to her GP and the University Counselling Service. This tutor subsequently became her personal tutor as the one she was originally allocated, was on long-term sick leave. Perhaps Lisa might have received help earlier if she had been allocated a personal tutor who was available at the start of the course. The importance of the personal tutor relationship in providing a safety net when things go wrong, and of student support services, is also illustrated by Sally's case.

Sally made an inappropriate choice of degree course, as indicated in Chapter 4. Her story was that she entered via Clearing, after an informal chat with the admissions tutor, but no discussion as to whether the course was right for her. She got the impression that course numbers were low and they were "happy to have somebody else coming in". Although Sally found the subject interesting, she found the course tough, felt she was "scraping by" and didn't fit in with the rest of the cohort. She had a personal tutor whom she described as "lovely" but not always approachable because

she was so busy. After 8 months, Sally felt "desperate" and decided to give up, but fortunately, she contacted the Student Advice Centre who took a key role in sorting out a course transfer and grant funding. She said:

> "I don't know anyone that's been to university, not family or friends, and I didn't know anybody there, and it was just really, really isolating, so thank goodness you know, Student Advice were there to sort of, lead me through that path, really."

Sally's story draws attention to the isolation that can be faced by mature students, and this issue will be taken up later in this chapter. One solution advocated by Ben, is to have a group support scheme. He described his involvement in the setting up of a peer assisted support scheme (PASS) whereby second year students act as mentors for first years. He regretted that there had not been such a scheme in his first year when he felt there was a big hole in the support available to students of all ages.

Please tell me how I'm doing

Feedback was an issue for five participants who wanted more help in assessing their progress than they obtained from comments on coursework. Katie explained that her assignment feedback comprised one page with comments but she wanted feedback on the body of the assignment in order to see where she had gone wrong. Knowing of this practice on her friend's course, she suggested to her tutor that two copies of the assignment could be handed in, so that one could be returned with comments. The tutor's reply, "we don't do that at New College" perplexed Katie, who couldn't understand why courses had different rules. She was also concerned that with one week to go to the end of term exam, she had received tutor feedback on only one of six assignments submitted, and that "nothing is being explained properly to us how we can get the proper feedback from them". The issue of feedback was a particular concern when students were no longer in contact with the assessor. On Pat's course, students

received a written sheet with comments and a model answer with ticks against points that were included but she would have preferred to see the tutor personally to go through the assignment.

Lisa thought that the need for feedback was not "a mature students' thing" because she knew of younger students who shared her concerns. However, from the stories I was told, I consider that mature students who have been out of education for some time, are more likely to lack internal benchmarks to give them a feel for how they are doing, in comparison with their peers. This view is also held by Young (2000) who has found that while students on all courses are unsure of the standards and their own abilities at the beginning, it is especially acute with adults returning to education. Certain students also need positive feedback to counter the feelings of failure from their earlier life. Ellen said she still had her parents' voices in the back of her head, from when she was younger, saying that she was not good enough. Getting good marks for essays was helping to restore her self belief, as she put it, "university has definitely put a smile on my face". Maria found it embarrassing, sometimes demoralising, when tutors made verbal comments when returning assessed work to individuals in class as a "well done" to one class member only highlighted that another had not done as well. She felt quite strongly that work should just be handed out and if needed, individuals could arrange to discuss it later with the tutor.

Being older

A strand of my interviewing explored what it felt like being an adult student in HE. Participants revealed both positive and negative experiences of just being older, and being older in relation to other students. The majority spoke positively about feeling more confident with age, having a mature relationship with tutors, and equal, or better, treatment than younger students. Ellen said that she liked being treated as an adult on an equal level with lecturers, who were not like teachers. Judy felt that lecturers take mature students more seriously because they make an active contribution, unlike the

majority of young students. She and Jim thought it was good that lecturers do not discriminate by age, but take an interest in those students who take an interest in their subject. Ben felt that his work experience was a positive feature and he had been encouraged to reflect on this in tutorials. In contrast, on an engineering course, Hans thought there should be more opportunities for discussion, and found a variation between lecturers as to whether his practical experience was valued. He recalled occasions when he knew that laboratory examples did not work in the field, but accepted what a lecturer said as he did not want to be seen as "the guy who argues". Good practice in teaching adult students indicates that tutors should adopt a more interactive approach and relate the subject matter to life experiences (see above, page 25) but research has shown that many lecturers do not modify their teaching styles when adults are in their groups (Bourgeois, op cit). Interestingly, Bourgeois also reports that while most lecturers valued the life-experiences that adults bring to the learning process, a sociology lecturer believed that mature students study to escape from or transcend their life-experiences. This view was reflected by Judy who was studying social policy, indicating perhaps, that there may be subject differences in the value of drawing on experience.

Some participants identified benefits from being older. Danny pointed to his commitment to work and a good attendance record stemming from being used to the demands of working life. Lisa compared undergraduate study in her 'teens with her mid-forties, and found she related better to tutors with whom she had less of an age gap, and also to fellow students as she had been quite shy and insular in her youth. In Lisa's experience, lecturers had a positive attitude to mature students:

> "I think mature students are treated differently by the lecturers. I think you're not patronised generally as much, and you're treated much more as an equal, I think. I get the feeling that the lecturers like mature students on the whole. Perhaps your motivation is very different because you've chosen to take a break

in your career and sacrifice things to do this, and you have a different outlook on life generally by that stage."

However, she felt that the cohort as a whole were largely regarded as "exam fodder" and often treated like schoolchildren. One example was when the class were told off for taking food into lectures; Lisa knew this was bad behaviour on the part of younger students and remarked, "At 46, I don't have to be told this". Generally, Lisa had found being an adult student "very invigorating" and recommended it, but Sally had a less happy experience. She described how at the age of 30, she was one of the eldest on the course, and had felt that most tutors had patronised and belittled her. Sally recalled:

"...all the others, even ones that were probably about the same age as me, maybe even a bit younger, they were the most patronising because I think they felt, what are you doing here at your age?"

The following year she transferred to a different course in New College, where she found being older was not a problem, the tutors were very approachable and "almost like they're on the same par as you". Carol also noticed a difference in the attitudes of tutors in different disciplines. In her late '40s, she undertook an MBA where most of the class were younger male students, and she felt that tutors were not interested in her contribution to discussion because of prejudiced assumptions based on her age and appearance. Carol said:

"Age was to do with it – I think it was just the way I looked and my age. They'd obviously pigeon-holed me."

Subsequently, Carol was pleased to be free of such attitudes on an EdD, and she remarked that the Faculty of Education was the only faculty in her experience where she had felt the tutors were "completely unbiased in all aspects".

Encounters with "grandpa"

The research participants were on courses with a mix of ages and often a majority of their cohort were younger, in the 18-21 age group. Several participants said they were aware of their age difference, and usually they had a positive attitude to this. Katie and Hans liked being with younger students who kept them "young at heart". Katie mixed with younger people through sport outside HE and so the age mix on the course had no impact on her. Hans was called "grandpa" by the other students, and although he found this strange, he took it in good humour. Danny had a similar attitude to Hans and was relaxed about being among younger students for whom he was "old enough to be their father". He had anticipated some ageist remarks but experienced none, although initially he had been the butt of jokes for being slow. Generally, Danny found that the age difference was not an issue because all students were working on the same thing and achieving at the same levels.

Ben was aware before he started his course that he would be one of the oldest, and he anticipated this would have advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages, he cited getting more out of the course by drawing on his life experience. The main disadvantage was social isolation. Although Ben enjoyed talking to younger students, whom he described as "really bright kids" who had done more than he had at their age, he made only 2 or 3 good friends on the course. He found that some students were wary of his age and also perhaps his size. I could relate to this, as I felt nervous on my first encounter with the burly ex-policeman. Ben said he advocated older and younger students being mixed in tutor groups, but his narrative indicates that he found it helpful to be with other mature students in his first year while he settled in to HE. Once he knew "what was required", he was better able to adapt to learning in a mixed age group.

Lisa, Maria and Lynn found it reassuring to be studying alongside mature students although they appeared to relate well to younger students. Maria had expected to see

more mature students, and being with so many young students had initially been a "bit of a shock". Lynn commented that older students "don't want to sit in a classroom with wide age differences", and she felt that the slightly older age group at New College encourages mature students to return to education. Judy had observed some differences between students of different age groups, including younger students being more concerned about their clothes and appearance, getting "all done up to go to lectures". She was horrified that they were so right wing, as she had expected older people to be the more conservative of the two. By contrast, Jim did not feel any affinity with the mature (female) students on his course and found it easier to talk to younger students, but he had not made any friendships. He felt that age-groups were expected to stay together and joked that younger students saw him as "a bit of an odd ball" who shouldn't be here.

Stories in the media have suggested that mature students experience "a youth-orientated monoculture in some British universities" (Bunting, 2002) and age discrimination in the attitudes of both students and academics. Although there were some instances of ageism, this was not the general experience of participants in my sample. Their stories show that mature students accept that they will be learning alongside younger students. However, younger students could be more accommodating of different age groups: a change in attitudes would seem to be required to create an understanding that HE is not the exclusive preserve of the young, and that learning continues throughout life. Also, within the narratives, there is some evidence that putting mature students into a tutor group with similarly aged students can initially help them adapt to the demands of HE study, but this proposition would merit further study.

Separate lives

Several participants talked about the different priorities, responsibilities, and interests that caused them to lead separate lives to younger students. As adult students, they

invariably had a home to return to after lectures, and a life apart from the university, and this contributes to the social distance between them and younger students. In particular, the lack of mixing between the age groups was attributed to the fact that younger students tend to live in halls and have a similar social life. Ben and Sally had a sense of exclusion and isolation from other students, as they describe in the extracts below. Ben said:

> "We do lead separate lives there. I mean, I come home everyday to my wife and family and they go back to their halls or to their house and go out clubbing. (...) They have a social life with each other and to a great degree of course, I was excluded from that. Em, having said that, you know, I was asked to go out, but I don't particularly want to, having you know, other responsibilities. (...) Here I was, an older person, who perhaps didn't want to socialise as much, and as a result probably isolated myself rather than them not involving me. But once you become conscious of it, it's hard to get back to where you were before."

Sally recalled her unhappiness:

> "I can't pin-point it to any one thing, but I really think a lot to do with it was the social side. (...) Em, it was just really isolating, really vast and that would be great if everybody was getting on and friendly - and it wasn't a case that people weren't friendly, it was just a case that they were all living in halls, I lived in my own home, they got to know each other through necessity, had to live together, you know, went out together, socialised together. I didn't do the socialising side because I've got a family and I'm older. I didn't live near them, so it was every aspect of it really, the social side."

The above extract also implies loneliness in a crowd. McNay (in Haselgrove, 1994:172) forecast that growth in student numbers and large classes would lead to students being "more isolated but less insulated."

Judy regretted that caring responsibilities for a child and disabled father prevented her from joining in the social life of university. However, it was not a major issue for her because it would have been the same if she had been in employment, and she "wouldn't have had the fun of the lectures and essays". Provided an individual's main interest was academic and not social activities, she felt that going home to a family did not necessarily detract from the experience of HE. Another PhD student, Martha, concurred that in her peer group, it was understood that time spent on campus was "quite precious" and because they all had separate social lives at home, the lack of time for socialising was not an issue.

I explored whether more social provision was needed for mature students, but most participants indicated that they had come to HE to learn, and not for social activities. Freshers' Week for example, was not seen to be relevant to mature students who are keen to get down studying. Several participants remembered a talk for mature students during induction, but were not particularly interested in going to meetings. Ben said the problem was that mature students have other responsibilities which keep them away, and with so few on his course, there was not a group that could get together. Lisa was on a course with a greater number of mature students and while she could join in course members' social activities, she was happier to go home after lectures. She explained:

"I had 8 years of wild living in the Navy. I've been there, done that and got the T-shirt. I just don't feel the need for it anymore. One changes as you grow older and you are happy just to stay in."

This extract encapsulates the view expressed by the majority of participants: older students have less need for social provision than younger students, and their home life takes a greater priority. Because they have multiple roles and responsibilities, they have a different orientation to learning according to Smith (1983). However, even if mature students are less visible on campus, it is important to avoid social isolation as this has a negative impact on the overall experience of HE (McInnis, 2001). The stories of participants lead me to believe that HEIs and student union organisations should give more attention to after-class provision that addresses the social needs of a wider age range of students. But the immediate prospects are not auspicious, when for example, the National Union of Students (NUS) spokesperson on mature student issues has indicated that there is "massive ignorance" of age issues in the NUS (Bunting, 2002). It would seem that the social aspects of the HE experience of mature students would benefit from further study.

Family matters

In my interviews, I asked about the impact of studying on home life. Most participants had children to care for, partners, or other family responsibilities and spoke about the demands that studying made on their family life. Many mentioned receiving support and encouragement from partners but some with children felt that they were taking less of a role in bringing up their children than hitherto. A number were single parents and facing the difficulty of balancing their time between study and children, and Maria, Judy and Sally spoke of their concerns about children missing out or suffering in some way. These concerns mirror those of students in the Warwick study which noted that:

> "Mature students, particularly women, are constructing and pursing a student career while juggling with often conflicting roles such as worker, parent, carer, or partner." (Bourgeois et al, 1999:125).

Maria had faced difficulties because the hand-in dates for assessed work fell around the same time, at the "back end". She thought this did not trouble younger students who could spend three solid weeks studying and stay up all night to get work finished, but she was constrained by her responsibilities of maintaining a home and looking after her daughter. Generally, Maria had struggled to find time to study at home and she anticipated this would get more difficult as her daughter grew older, although she felt she was setting a good example by applying herself to study. Martha and Judy also spoke about childcare putting a constraint on when they could study. Judy described the difficulties that arose when short assessment deadlines combined with family crises, and identified a need for time-planning. She recalled with feeling the tensions in balancing time spent with her son as opposed to her studies:

> "There have been times when I didn't even have time to have a bloody bath
> without reading a book in it because I was trying to write an essay or
> something, and short deadlines and disasters happening just before you reach
> them and that sort of thing." She later added, "Where it impacts on me is the
> fact if he doesn't go to bed 'till like, 9 o'clock, quarter past 9, and after dinner
> and I've cleared up and everything and I think, do I start now? If I do some
> now, I've got to do it 'till 1 to be worthwhile and then what have I got to do
> tomorrow? And I resent that."

Sally had three boys, aged 10, 11, and 12, and was also trying to balance her time between coursework deadlines and family demands. In the following two extracts, Sally speaks about her dilemma:

> "I could probably get most of my work done by the time they come home from
> school each day, unless there's assignments and things. Em, I get quite irritable
> sometimes when I'm under pressure and that affects them and yea, it's little
> things, I mean sometimes I over-compensate by taking them to every club

possible and then they get sick of it and don't go to any clubs. You know, it's trying to find the right balance which we haven't yet done."

"There was one point where I was close to - I don't know - giving up (...) It was just my feelings were getting that panicky em, because I had to move house and my son had an operation in the same week, plus I had two assignments due that week and that was just a nightmare. Em, but it wasn't a nightmare if you see what I mean".

Maria experienced inconsistent attitudes among tutors when she asked for an extension to a deadline, with more academic tutors being more insistent that rules were not to be broken. She felt that more flexibility was needed if HE is to attract people with families. Jim also commented on the unsympathetic attitude of a module tutor at a time when his wife was due to deliver their baby. Jim wanted to be contacted if there were any birth problems while he was sitting an end-of-year exam and was irritated that "almost everything was academically looked at instead of personally." This story serves to illustrate the finding of Ostar (1981, cited by Knapper and Cropley, 2000:67) that adult learners are concerned about aspects of their lives that are not typically regarded as 'academic', that is, emotional, interpersonal, and social factors. Although, it is possible that mature students are simply focusing attention on aspects of learning that are important for all students, but have traditionally been overlooked.

Participants' stories show that assessment deadlines, especially when they are short or bunched can cause real problems for students with families. They do not have the capacity to drop all other interests to prioritise their studies and cannot anticipate family crises that may demand their attention. The important point for an HE sector seeking to meet the needs of adult learners is that a course team must plan an assessment schedule that provides for well-staggered deadlines and also take a sympathetic approach to dealing with individual circumstances and requests for coursework extensions.

Housework does not exist

My question on the impact of studying on home life, revealed the compromises that students with children have to make. Lynn found that in order to find time for study, she had to change her priorities and she joked that "housework does not exist". Although she was not able to spend as much time with her children, she felt this was compensated by her husband now taking a greater role in the family. Pat, as a single working parent with a child doing GCSEs, had tried to minimise the impact of studying on her son by joining a part-time course with only one evening of attendance as she did not want to leave him alone for any more time. Martha also faced childcare problems but was able to choose a different solution. She had initially tried to combine part-time work and PhD study with raising a young child, however, she had found it very stressful when her daughter was ill, and it was difficult for her and her partner to take time off. Martha's decision to give up work and take up full-time study was motivated by the difficulties of childcare. Although she still had to plan everything well in advance to make sure childcare arrangements were in place, she found being a student had a very positive effect on her home life. Overall, it was much better to combine academic study, rather than employment, with childcare because of the flexibility that being a student offered.

Maria made a very different kind of compromise in order to accommodate study and childcare. A single parent with a 3 year-old daughter, she was only able to take up HE study because she gained funding for a nursery place. She realised towards the end of her Access course that she had not made the right choice of degree course but decided not to change because she had secured childcare arrangements that fitted with that course. She explained that nursery places have to be arranged very early and she could not be sure that alternative facilities would be possible if she changed course. Maria's experience highlights the need for flexible childcare provision for mature students, and suggests that some students may not pursue HE, if childcare places are not available.

Also, funding of childcare, and financing study in general, is an important issue for mature students, and this is discussed in a later section. Other issues for participants with families were the need for information on study commitments, timetabling and attendance, and class starting and finishing times.

Being family friendly

Several participants said they needed earlier notice of timetables and days of attendance in order to make childcare arrangements. Sally complained that timetables were only made available a week before the semester started and if her children had been younger; there would have been major problems in organising childcare. Martha said that before she started her PhD, she was not made aware of a requirement to attend courses and seminars at specific times of day. Fortunately, she was on maternity leave from work and her mother was able to help with childcare, otherwise it would have been impossible for her to attend. She felt quite strongly that if HE is to attract people with commitments, it needs to be clear about what it expects of individuals right at the start, so that they can make a judgement whether they can fit study in with the rest of their lives.

Lynn and Sally had problems when the University terminated the practice of holding reading weeks coinciding with school half term holidays. Sally said that these breaks were part of the appeal for people with children, and she was unable to attend most classes in those particular weeks. Lynn found it harder to complete a "three day take-home exam" as her children were home on holiday. Maria and Jim also experienced difficulty with the organisation of timetables and class starting and finishing times that were not family friendly. They pointed out that attending lectures starting before 9.30 a.m. was difficult for parents taking children to school. Jim had taken this up with his course tutor but hadn't found the flippant response, "well, the lecturers don't like lecturing that early either" very helpful.

Lectures continuing to 6 p.m. also created problems for Maria since childcare at the University nursery finished at 5.45 p.m. Jim suggested that it would be helpful to mature students if some classes could be held in the evenings when partners or baby-sitters were available and students could concentrate on their classes without the worry of collecting children from school or a childminder. However, offering courses in the evening is not easy; for some lecturers this would cause problems for their own family lives, and others find it necessary to use evenings and weekends for research (Bourgeois, op cit:128).

Participants were also critical of timetables that were spread across most days of the week. Jim described a difficult first semester when he was attending classes every day and trying to fit in studying between taking his son to school, and picking him up at 3.30 p.m. Fortunately he found out from other (female) students that a mature student with children could apply for preferential treatment in timetable allocations, and his second semester was much easier attending on three days a week. Maria was similarly able to reduce attendance from four to two days, but she confessed that she was less likely to attend a class if it was the only one timetabled. She said:

"It was ridiculous, one day I had to go in at 2.30 in the afternoon, so I had to pay for a whole afternoon's care for Olivia, and sometimes I didn't go, to be honest. Sometimes I couldn't be bothered and other people have said that to me towards the end of the programme, like this semester, they haven't been bothering going 'cos its like, you've got to start in the middle of the afternoon, you've got to start getting yourself ready and get on a bus or have an hour's drive to just come in for an hour."

These stories highlight the significance of timetabling for mature students who are usually living at some distance from the campus, so that travelling cuts into the time available for study, and who incur the expense of travel, parking, and perhaps also

111

childcare. Maria drew attention to the need for a priority parking system for students who are bringing a child and buggy to nursery as well as carrying study materials.

However, not all students wanted to rearrange their timetable to attend on fewer days. Lynn was happy to have a spread because she found it challenging to attend consecutive lectures on different subjects. Her comments illustrate the importance of reflection on learnt material for adult learning noted by Candy *et al* (1994). Lynn said:

> "The younger ones seem to be able to walk from one lecture to another lecture on a completely different subject, and still keep going, where I can't. I find if I've done one lecture, I'm still thinking of that while I'm sat in the other one and I can't quite - so the fact that I'm in every day and I'm doing totally different subjects, I find helps me."

Tom Schuller has observed "many academics organising their seminars with no thought as to whether they can fit into mature students' lives" (reported by Bunting, 2002). There is probably no timetable that will suit everybody equally but HEIs should consider how timetabling and attendance can be organised to be more 'family friendly'. Attendance requirements need to be communicated at an early stage so that students with commitments can make appropriate arrangements, and where possible, there should be flexibility to accommodate individual needs.

Library and facilities

In order to identify other aspects of the HE experience that could be improved, I asked research participants for their views on the library, computing and other facilities and resources. Library facilities received few comments but some first year students said they were not comfortable in the Hartley Library which they found daunting and like a maze. The ability to access the library from a computer at home was mentioned, but also described as daunting, and the short term book loan did not benefit mature

students living off campus. Judy felt that it was "utterly ridiculous" that "you have to bring it back before you've even had a chance to look at it because you live so far away". At Warwick, a similar complaint from part-time students was addressed by establishing a special section of the library where they could take out books on more convenient terms to suit their dual role as student and worker (Bourgeois, op cit).

The majority of participants were not using university IT facilities because they found it easier to use their own computer at home. Reasons included familiarity with their own equipment, dislike of having to queue and pay for print-outs, and the impracticality of staying on campus to work in the evening when children were at home. Some students observed that the growth in computer-based learning would give more opportunity for home-based learning, and cut down the requirement for travelling to the campus. In light of the increasing dependence on IT, Jim who had recently had problems with his own computer, suggested there should be some arrangement to purchase cheap computing equipment, "because once the computer goes down, you're lost at university". The experience of participants suggests that HE needs to look at different models of support for student computing. As more students own their own equipment, there is perhaps less need to invest in open access facilities on campus, and a growing need to support remote access, plus provision of more instruction and guidance on using IT.

Students including Katie, Sally and Lisa, said they did not find it easy to concentrate and study on campus and it was more comfortable returning home to study. Sally complained that there was nowhere that a mature student could relax and meet with friends, and felt that the provision of facilities between campuses was unfair since the New College bar had been closed when the main campus bar had been refurbished. Lisa and Judy had been professional women prior to their HE programmes, and objected to being peripatetic, having to carry their coats and papers to different rooms around the campus rather than being settled in one place. Lisa said:

"I didn't expect that I would have nowhere to sort of, park myself, nowhere to live in the University. So I end up carting my coat round and my bags around all day. I've nowhere to hang my coat which sounds really trivial but when you've been in business and up until my last job, I would have my own office, my own secretary, somewhere to hang my coat (laughs) and my own little home so I could put my pictures on the wall and put my things on the desk. And now I've become a nomad, an undergraduate nomad".

Lisa was concerned that on wet days, which had been common in the previous six months, wet clothes had to be carried around all day, and that there was nowhere to sit, relax and have a drink of water while waiting for the next lecture. She felt that this had impacted on her learning in that she had returned home to study rather than be uncomfortable on campus, with the result that she had not accessed library facilities as much as she should have done. The stories of Judy and Lisa indicate a problem that affects mature students who are living off-campus: they do not have access to a study room in their hall of residence for times in-between formal classes. This aspect of HE provision is worthy of further study to establish if the provision of lockers, study carousels that can be reserved by students, and more and better rest and refreshment facilities would make the HE learning environment more amenable to older learners.

Learning to ignore debt

The funding of HE was not an issue that I intended to explore and I indicated this in my briefing to participants. However, they frequently mentioned money worries when asked about difficulties encountered and influences on their future take-up of learning. It became clear that financial concerns were impacting on their motivation to study and their experience of HE and were therefore pertinent to my research. This section draws on the narratives to illustrate the pressures and concerns that participants shared with me.

Six participants indicated they were financing their studies by means of a student loan and three others had ESRC grants. Of the remainder, one had fee support from her employer, and the others were self-financing, with two drawing on recent redundancy payments. Those on student loans talked about the prospect of large debts at the end of three years of full-time study. Debbie, Maria, and Sally were heavily reliant on their loan plus some additional support they received as single parents, and without which they would not have been able to continue in HE. Maria estimated a debt on graduation of £12-15,000. She regarded herself as fortunate in having received money for books, travel and childcare from her housing association charity and also from the University, but she was worried whether this would continue over the next two years. She had heard that grants for childcare were to be replaced and hoped this would not entail a further loan because, "I don't think I could face starting work again with that level of debt."

Sally had received what she called "access funds" for mature students but she didn't know what the criteria were, and there was no guarantee funding would continue.[2] Like Maria, she was expecting to pay off her debts when she got a job on completion of HE, but in the meantime, she had little prospect of earning money over the summer holidays with children to look after. Sally felt that the level of debt had not been fully explained when applications to HE were made, and she was experiencing difficulty living on a student loan as a single parent with three children. She said:

> "I can't imagine being able to get through three years on hardly any money and children. I mean, it's OK if it's just an adult, you can say, oh well, beans on toast isn't that bad is it, you know, and scrimp and scrape but when you've got children who still want what they want, still need clothing, still need Christmas presents, birthday presents, and you know."

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[2] The financial support to non-traditional students especially mature students with children has subsequently been simplified following criticism from the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee about a "dog's breakfast" of financial support (Baty, 2002).

She had developed a reliance on credit cards, bought a car on HP, and was in her own words, burying her head in the sand and ignoring the debt. Although not in favour of debt, she had to go into debt to sustain an acceptable lifestyle. Research on student attitudes to debt shows that once debt is incurred, attitudes to debt change and become more tolerant of debt (Davies and Lea, 1995). The impact of education funding policies on the population's attitude to debt could be quite significant. I was certainly concerned about the long financial viability of Sally's family unit. Lynn and Jim were more fortunate in having financial support from their partners, but they complained about the threshold on earnings which prevented them from receiving any grants. Both said that there should be more financial help for married couples with children. Jim had managed to pay off his mortgage with a redundancy payment, otherwise he said, "if we had a mortgage and two children and HP and everything else, I couldn't be doing this."

Ellen and Lisa, single people, were philosophical about their financial commitments, believing that provided the mortgage was paid, somehow the rest would work out. Danny's strategy was to plan and budget his family finances carefully and cut costs including arranging a cheaper mortgage. He couldn't understand why some other students had commenced their course and then dropped out when they realised they could not afford it. But with his commercial background, and wife employed in banking, Danny probably found it easier to work out a budget unlike Sally who needed help on money matters. Several participants indicated a need for more clarity and transparency in information on the financing of HE and I concluded that guidance on financial matters should be available to mature students before they commit themselves to a degree programme.

Chapter 6: Lessons for the teacher

Summary

In this chapter, I draw together significant findings in relation to the three research questions posed in the Introduction. In the first section, I elucidate the motives and needs that attracted participants to undertake HE. In the second section, I review their experience including encounters with entry and admission processes, and teaching and learning support provision, and I give an assessment of the appropriateness of such arrangements for adult learners. The third section adumbrates the processes and structures that are relevant to enabling more individuals to become lifelong learners. The research findings confirm my initial proposition that lifelong learning provision is problematic for HEIs and requires changes to be made within institutions and to policy at national level. My research is not conclusive and I reflect on my research methodology and identify areas which merit further research.

Section 1:   What lifelong learners are seeking from HE

At the beginning of my study, I defined 'lifelong learners' as individuals with a commitment to continuing to learn throughout their adult years because learning enhances their life in some way. In the first strand of my research, I was seeking to uncover what were the motivational factors and perceived benefits that encouraged research participants to return to learning on a formal, planned programme of learning in HE. In this section, I summarise my findings on these two dimensions.

There were fifteen research participants and for all but one, vocational reasons played some part in their motivation for undertaking their current course. For around one-third, their primary objective was to obtain job-related qualifications, and others indicated a range of vocational considerations had influenced their decision to take up

HE. Vocational reasons included being able to do a present job better, aspiration to get a higher level or more challenging job, maintaining employability, and developing an interest that was related to employment. Thus, my research has confirmed the continuing relevance of vocational objectives to students' reasons for applying for HE noted by Silver and Silver (1997). However, most participants articulated general aspirations rather than specific occupational goals. As many were recent 'Returners' who had only just completed their first year in HE, they had not yet given much consideration to the paths they would take post-graduation. Engineering students had clearer goals than those on humanities and social science courses and had made a significant financial commitment to five years of study to achieve their ambitions.

The motives of learners were more complex than the apparent concurrence of vocational objectives. In common with other studies (e.g. Lunneborg, 1997; Fuller cited in Hodgson, 2000), I found that participants had multiple reasons for pursuing HE, and these were both personal and vocational. A marked difference can be discerned in the rationales that participants gave when asked about their initial attraction to HE, and what they were hoping to achieve as a result of HE.

The attraction to HE stemmed from a wide range of personal reasons such as an interest in the subject and quest for intellectual challenge; a need for personal fulfilment and to improve self-esteem; and enjoyment of learning, as well as a general expectation that HE would open up opportunities. In many cases, participants had begun on a FE or Access course and their enjoyment of learning and the experience of achievement at that level had raised their personal horizons. Other participants, who had previously gained HE degrees, were attracted to return to HE for reasons of subject interest and intellectual challenge, and with the knowledge that further qualifications would compliment their existing skills.

What participants hoped to achieve was much more focused on vocational attainment as evidenced by their choice of degree subject. The majority perceived that their

degree would bring job and career opportunities and in some cases, greater job security and employability. Only three (one undergraduate and two PhD students) were more interested in personal achievement by pursuing their learning to the highest level of qualification. It is perhaps not surprising that so many participants articulated vocational benefits given the considerable financial and personal commitment that their HE programmes typically entailed.

In terms of the three categories of adult learners put forward by Smith and Spurling (2001), the majority of participants exhibited characteristics of 'Self-developers'; several were clearly 'Returners'; and some were 'Updaters', but none were of the 'crisis' type, they were at most, 'pre-emptors'. Among the 'Returners', there were several 'Deferred beginners' (McNair, 1993), who for a variety of reasons including family circumstances, the effects of past discrimination, or previous career misjudgements, were entering the HE system later than has been traditional. However, individuals' characteristics usually spanned two categories, especially among the 'Returners', who as they gained confidence had redefined their motives and aspirations. The experience of HE had often widened what participants hoped to achieve. Thus such classifications can help conceptualise motives and types of learning opportunities, but they are of limited use for identifying the needs adults may have of the education system.

While I accept that individual motivations and social influences have no easy demarcation (Erben,1998:1), the overriding motive that I discerned was a need for achievement and self-fulfilment. The majority of participants were making up for what they saw as underachievement in their youth; only two participants regarded themselves as high achievers in their initial education. The emancipatory view of HE that West (1996) advanced following her study in Kent in the early 1990s was not reflected in my study of adults in the relatively more affluent area of south Hampshire in 2001. Here, I found that HE was seen as a means of overcoming feelings of underachievement and inadequacy by comparison with others, and of validating their

innate sense of personal worth. Thus my findings were more in tune with those of Elliott (1999) and of Bourgeois *et al* (1999) that adults often undertake HE because they actively want to change their lives and prove to themselves that they are capable of studying at this level. To some extent, there was evidence of what Giddens (1991) describes as the 'reflexive project of self', with individuals revising their biographical narrative as a form of survival.

I concluded that my research participants were seeking satisfaction of their higher order needs of esteem (of self and others) and self-actualisation by realising their potential (Maslow, 1943). But motives cannot be simply explained by reference to the hierarchy of needs theory given that so many participants had put at risk their financial security (lower order safety need) by giving up regular jobs in order to pursue HE. Although individuals are exhorted to engage with lifelong learning for the benefit of the economy and personal adaptation to the labour market, this was not reflected as a significant reason for taking up HE. While HE would bring vocational benefits either consciously or accidentally for all the participants, they had wider motives and personal rationales for participation. A lesson from the study is that a focus on economic circumstances or extrinsic factors such as better pay is only likely to be relevant to some learners or to learners in part. To encourage more individuals to become lifelong learners, policy makers and HE managers need to trumpet the intrinsic and personal benefits that accrue from learning, and not assume instrumental motivations. Lunneborg (op cit) has highlighted that if education is primarily marketed for occupational ends, then learners may mirror these rationalisations.

A noteworthy finding was that many participants did not anticipate continuing with HE on completion of their current course. Although a majority indicated they were committed lifelong learners, a significant number expected that further formal development would be in association with an employer or professional body. Several of the 'Returners' group thought they would be unlikely to return to HE for further learning unless it was in short, sharp bursts or paid for by employers. This attitude is

understandable given that they had only just completed the first year of their first degree, and attitudes have been found to change as degree studies near completion (Merrill, 1997). Doctoral students also saw completion of their degree as the culmination of their higher education and had not envisioned a continuing role for HE in their updating. There seems to be a major opportunity for HEIs to promote their lifelong learning provision to alumni and to build bridges between HE and continuing vocational training.

Section 2:

How the HE learning experience meets the needs of lifelong learners

In Chapter 2, I defined the student experience as embracing all aspects of a student's interaction with a HE institution and the impact of being a student on the life-world of the individual. In my research, I found that all participants were positive about their current learning experience and were reasonably optimistic about achieving their degree. In relation to their wider personal objectives, individuals had gained in self-esteem and they could see a way to realising their potential through their programme. However, I drew from the narratives that the HE learning experience could more fully meet learners' needs if certain changes were made. This section summarises the significant elements that contributed more or less to meeting participants' needs, following the 'flow' (HEQC, 1994) of a student's experience from admissions and entry, through involvement with a programme, to student outcomes.

Admission and entry

The admissions process is important because if individuals do not successfully navigate it, HE will be unable to begin to address their needs for lifelong learning. Admissions procedures should provide for equality of opportunity and establish that anyone admitted to a programme of study can be reasonably expected to fulfil the objectives of the programme and achieve the standard required (HEQC, 1994). While

this tenet largely held, in two cases, the interview procedure had shortcomings. In one case, the interview was quick and informal and insufficient information was obtained for an appropriate selection decision to be made on, or by, the candidate. In the other case, the interview was very demanding and off-putting for an applicant not accustomed to academic conventions. Thus the procedures took insufficient account of the individuals' backgrounds and limited knowledge of HE, and resulted respectively, in a withdrawal and a deferral.

Dissemination of relevant information to adult learners is important so that they can make appropriate life choices, but my study showed that it is difficult for members of the public to learn about HE. Several 'Returners' only became aware of opportunities for HE through word of mouth from friends, family or FE college tutors, and because of their own efforts rather than by being presented with information. When one participant began his enquiries, he had no idea whether it was possible for someone his age to undertake an engineering degree. Another became aware of university open days only because she was already in education, on an Access course, and advocated much wider publicity of such events to adults.

Pre-entry guidance and preparation for HE did not fully meet the needs of several participants.[3] While Access programmes provided considerable assistance to 'Returners', there were shortcomings, including preparation for the amount of work, especially reading, required in HE, and in degree course choices having to be made early in the programme before interests, aptitudes, and degree pathways were fully understood. Significantly, mathematics provision was deemed insufficient for entry to science-based HE courses. This results in some subjects being less accessible to mature students. In a similar vein is the requirement to undertake an engineering foundation course prior to an engineering degree. As Bourgeois et al (1999:105) have indicated, there are underlying assumptions about knowledge and relationships

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[3] This is not only an issue for mature students. UCAS figures on the number of students who drop out of university (18 per cent) suggest many applicants could benefit from better advice and guidance.

between different knowledge areas, which tend to limit entry by non-traditional adult students. A criticism of the engineering foundation degree programme was that it appeared to be more relevant to the needs of civil and mechanical engineering than to computing engineering. This observation may be indicative of a need to review the curricula; Knapper and Cropley (2000:59) report on studies which indicate a need for engineering curricula to break out of the "straightjacket imposed by traditional skills, attitudes and values" and focus more on innovation.

Participants found that adjusting to being a student was daunting, although they gained reassurance from the presence of other mature students on campus, from being part of a mature group of students, and from supportive tutors. The situation was less traumatic for those who had participated in an Access programme and had already established a peer group. Difficult aspects related to the size of the HE enterprise including encountering large groups of people and finding rooms, while a friendly and comfortable atmosphere helped the settling in process. Lack of confidence and fear of not being able to cope in comparison with other students was a typical reaction. This is not surprising as according to Tight (1998), lack of confidence is one of the most persistent findings of research into the experiences of returners to learning. The "Freshers' Week" of activities for new students was not valued, and the general conclusion I reached was that adult students have different induction needs to those of school-leavers.

Teaching and learning

The student experience of teaching and learning is heavily dependent on the practices of staff, including their display of knowledge and enthusiasm for their subject, understanding of how students learn, and support to students in developing their academic skills (HEQC, 1996). In my study, the learning experience met students' needs in some, but not all of these respects. Mostly, participants were enjoying learning and found returning to learning as an adult was invigorating. Particularly in humanities and social science subjects, they were very impressed by the intellect and

expertise of lecturers. In most cases, participants were treated as adults and with mutual respect by their tutors. Generally, their stories show that tutors recognised that adults come to HE with a different mind-set and attitude to learning compared to school-leavers, and were supportive and encouraging. However, there were instances where lecturers did not show sufficient understanding of how adults learn, by displaying an aggressive style of presentation and not welcoming discussion of the practical application of theory. Usually, adults learn best in an atmosphere that is non-threatening and where learning content and process bear a meaningful relationship to past experience (Knowles, 1984; Brookfield, 1986). However, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) have pointed out that the ways individual students experience learning depends on their previous experiences, which may mean they see their resulting situations in different ways. Thus, students do not necessarily perceive their situation in the way it was designed due to the interaction between their prior experiences and the context.

In many HEIs, departmental strategies entail 'mainstreaming', that is integrating mature students into the general student cohort (HEFCE, 2002), and there were examples of this in my study. Individuals differed in their attitude to mainstreaming, but the student groups of which they were members, which were often a younger age group, affected their learning experience. Some participants were made to feel unwelcome by younger students and sometimes tutors because they were older and different, and isolated because they did not take part in student social activities. Thus, they often gravitated to mature student sub-groups within their cohort as observed by Bourgeois (op cit) and Ward and Jenkins (1999), although this was not always possible where there were few mature students on the course. In general, participants felt that their needs were better met when they felt they 'belonged' and the age range in their classes did not make them feel uncomfortable, as was experienced at New College.

Although social relationships were relevant to a positive experience for participants in my study, they put much more store on the enjoyment of learning than in the social aspects. This contrasts with the findings of a study of undergraduates at Oxford

Brookes University. Ward and Jenkins (ibid) concluded that whether people succeed at university and enjoy the experience depends on the relationships they form while they are there, as their course is a limited part of the whole experience. Since their research group was predominantly young students, this difference in our conclusions points to a need to revise notions of what is important in the student experience where adult learners are concerned. Also, within my study there was a small group of postgraduate research students who experienced isolation and regretted the lack of contact with students with similar interests. As has been suggested by McNair (1997), more attention should be given to ways of supporting this group of students.

Timetables and attendance requirements were often problematic for participants many of whom had families and domestic responsibilities, and although enrolled on full-time undergraduate courses, most were in effect, part-time students. This is not uncommon; according to Brennan *et al* (2000), learning as an adult is likely to be a part-time experience whatever the form, level or purpose of their studies. Consequently, it was important that course requirements were made clear at an early stage, even before enrolment, so that they could work out how study could be fitted in with the rest of their lives. Course options were chosen to fit around their other commitments, and unexpected changes such as ending the practice of reading weeks and arranging faculty-wide events caused particular problems. McNair (op cit) has also noted that the external commitments of mature students constrain how they can interact with the institution; so for example, rearrangement of a seminar might inconvenience a young student but make attendance impossible or expensive for a mature student with childcare responsibilities.

A disadvantage of being on campus less frequently was that it was more difficult to tap into informal networks to find out about a tutor's expectations and what help is available, and therefore important that such information is set down in written form. Class timetables that were spread over too many days of the week, or involved travelling in for a single class did not meet the needs of adults who are less likely to

live on or near campus. Not only were they concerned about the cost of travel but also the wasted time spent travelling. There was some disappointment that tutors were not more flexible and encouraging in their attitudes to people with families. In the Warwick study, people with families were also critical of inflexibility in relation to the need for timing of classes within school hours, and felt the University's policy to be hypocritical, by on the one hand promoting access and participation of adults, while practical policies mitigate against it (Bourgeois, ibid:126).

Learning support

Support for learning and development of HE students typically includes providing a physical environment and institutional culture conducive to learning; resources such as library and information technology services and study skills support; and academic guidance and personal tutoring aimed at enabling students to take responsibility for their learning and to achieve their full potential (HEQC, 1996). In these areas, the needs of research participants were varied and certain improvements could be made to meet them more fully.

The physical environment in terms of student facilities provides nowhere to put personal belongings and no rest and refreshment facilities appropriate for older students to use between and after classes. There appeared to be no "territorial spaces which were symbolically owned by adults" such as coffee bars and mature student common rooms found at other HEIs (Bourgeois, op cit). Participants did not make use of on-campus IT provision; domestic commitments normally required them to return home soon after classes, and it was essential to have computer facilities with access to e-mail at home to avoid a long journey just to check e-mails. However, setting up home computing entailed significant expense and there was no support for home-based computing. A disadvantage when students go home to study is that they are less likely to make spontaneous use of library facilities, and short-term loan arrangements are not helpful for participants living at a distance from the campus.

The library presented a barrier to several 'Returners' who experienced ill-ease when entering and using a large university library. The report 'Barriers to Libraries as Agents of Lifelong Learning' has identified that some students enter HE without a tradition of using a library and that some start their undergraduate careers with weaker literacy and numeracy skills than students in the past (Hull, 2001). Thus, libraries organised on the Dewey decimal classification system can appear impenetrable to people with a poor grasp of decimals, and on-line information systems may be unhelpful for those with poor spelling. A difficulty in locating sources on specific topics can affect the quality of students' work and place them at a disadvantage. Thus, there is a need for such difficulties to be diagnosed and addressed at an early point. In the case of Access course students, provision can be made during those courses for visits to the library to take part in informational retrieval skills sessions (Hull, ibid).

Several authors (e.g. McNay in Haselgrove, 1994:175) have identified that a more diverse student body is likely to require greater learning support, but that growth in student numbers reduces the time that academic staff have available. In these circumstances, many HEIs have organised special study programmes with mentoring or peer support systems for mature students. However, there appeared to be no such provision for the students in my study, although one student was assisting in a mentoring scheme for year one students, which he wished had been available for his first year. Knapper and Cropley (2000:116) advocate such schemes, citing evidence that peer interaction is a major contributor to students' cognitive development, and more important than time spent studying in formal classes.

Study skills were a problem for many of the 'Returners', including those who had completed Access courses. Study skills needs included how to read a book and make notes, how to structure an essay, and effective organisation of study. Although formal study skills classes were available, these were not very helpful, and participants wanted more help with specific problems from tutors in their subject area. As academic subjects have different literary conventions (Lea and Stierer, 2000), it is possible that

'Returners' may be disadvantaged because they do not have the same academic grounding as school-leavers who have followed 'A' levels. In addition, I noted that some 'Returners' needed better preparation for coping with the wider demands of HE study. This includes guidance on financing HE and money management, coping with children and family responsibilities, time management and the self-discipline that is needed to adapt to full-time study, especially when they know nobody who has attended university.

For participants with children, difficulties arose through the limited availability of childcare places on campus, childcare provision that closed earlier than daytime classes, and no automatic entitlement to a parking place when bringing a young child to childcare. These factors can militate against adults with children taking up HE. On the positive side, being a "full-time student" gave more flexibility and hence was more compatible with raising children than working full-time. So HE could be attractive to many more parents if provision for childcare could be tailored more to meet learners' needs.

Most participants had encountered no special provision for mature students. While they felt that university structures and facilities remained largely oriented to younger students, they did not seek special treatment; what was important to them was a perception of equal treatment for all. I concluded that the learning support needs of mature students are different and more complex than the needs of students who enter HE straight from school. Adult students arrive with diverse backgrounds and circumstances, including redundancy and early retirement; earlier failure in education; often as a parent with childcare responsibilities, and maybe separated or divorced. They do not have the parental, family and peer support which most school-leavers students are likely to have. Equal treatment would therefore entail access to a wider range of support than is presently available.

Assessment and feedback

Assessment serves many purposes, including demonstrating whether students have achieved the objectives of their programme of study and are ready to proceed or qualify for an award. It is an integral part of a student's learning experience, affecting their motivation and providing them with insight into the extent they have fulfilled the course objectives (HEQC, 1994). As the majority of research participants had only completed their first year of HE study, I was only able to gain a partial insight into the student experience in this area. However, they expressed anxieties about the assessment process and their abilities to make the grade. In common with Elliott (1999), I found that they were concerned about lack of tutor support in work that is set for assessment, such as guidance on what was required and tuition in essay writing. Also bunched hand-in dates for assignments or short deadlines were difficult for people with family responsibilities.

Participants' need for more feedback was explored in Chapter 5. Research with adult students (see Young, 2000) has shown that the earliest assignments are the greatest source of anxiety, which can be alleviated by ensuring that early assignments do not carry too much weight, allowing opportunities for supported re-submission; and providing early feedback. Young has identified that tensions around grading work and giving feedback are greater in teaching mature students. In particular, there are variations in the way students respond to feedback, which relate to their level of self-esteem. To support mature students, she advises the provision of a brief tutorial when work is returned at the beginning of the course, and opportunities for tutorials as students become more confident to decide their needs for themselves. This approach would seem most appropriate for the 'Returners' in my study.

Assessment by formal examinations was also causing anxiety for several participants who had been away from education for many years. They needed help with their examination techniques and practice through mock exams and feedback since they did

not have recent experience of examinations. Being able to choose final year options that were course-work assessed was very important to meet one participant's difficulties. HEFCE has indicated HEIs could give more thought to using alternative means of assessment that can enable students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge without lowering academic standards. One approach taken at the University of Sussex was to express assessment regulations as principles rather than defined modes so as to enable students to find appropriate ways to demonstrate 'in-depth engagement' with the subject (HEFCE, 2002).

I set out identify the significant elements that contributed more or less to meeting participants' needs. In summary, there are various elements in the student experience, and whether elements add to or detract from the overall learning experience depends on what an individual expects or wants it to be. For mature students, engagement with learning their subject and a sense of achievement is important, less so the social aspects which are felt to be a priority for young students. Thus, I conclude that we need new notions of the HE experience to accommodate the differing expectations and needs of young and mature students.

Section 3:
Changes to help HE to address individual needs for lifelong learning

The previous section has identified those elements of the student experience that were problematic for the adult learners in my study. This section draws some general conclusions on the development of a lifelong learning approach within the HE sector, and provides recommendations on the practical changes that would help to overcome the difficulties that learners faced. Firstly, I revisit the policy context, and then I address changes at the level of the institution and department.

Changes at policy and sector-wide level

Although lifelong learning has been a strong theme in national reports by Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) and Fryer (NAGCELL, 1997) and in Government policy statements over recent years (DfEE, 1996; DfEE, 1998a), it has not yet provided an organising framework for the HE sector. Henkel (2001:277) who recently studied the influence of lifelong learning policies in four HEIs, remarks that lifelong learning remains largely a matter of rhetoric partly because of "the contested meaning and overloaded value base of the lifelong learning policies". At the same time, other government policies have provided competing priorities for example, to widen participation, and to improve research performance and collaboration with business (Baty, 2001), and government initiatives reflecting aspects of lifelong learning have been established piecemeal often under different policy banners. In addition, resource allocation systems continue to concentrate on the under 30 age group (Schuller and Field, 1999). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that lifelong learning policies have had limited practical impact on HE. Clear policies and incentives are required at national level to provide a framework for the development of lifelong learning within HEIs.

Across the sector, individual HEIs have a diversity of mission with various emphases, for example, on research, teaching, social exclusion, and lifelong learning. The Government recognises that they cannot sustain an equal emphasis on all activities (DfES, 2003). It appears unlikely that there will be an 'adultification' of HE whereby there is a national commitment to restructuring the whole HE system to support adult access and participation in learning following the Swedish model (see Bourgeois, op cit). What is more likely is specialisation of mission between institutions. My conclusions regarding the changes to be made at the level of the institution and department assume that lifelong learning has been made an institutional priority.

Changes at the level of the institution and department

For HEIs to begin to develop as learning organisations that support lifelong learning will require building a shared vision and changes in strategies, structures, cultures, systems and people (Tann, 1995). Case studies on successful change in widening participation in HE have identified that strategies will vary depending on the overall management structure and extent of devolution for resources and policy (HEFCE, 2002). With clear lessons for lifelong learning, the studies show that new initiatives usually require enthusiasts or 'champions' at institutional and departmental level to persuade colleagues to adapt their strategies (ibid:5). Departments should be encouraged to make concrete plans for activities rather than rely on aspirations, and institutions should take a strategic approach to providing central services to support staff and students. Henkel (2001) advocates structures to promote and co-ordinate lifelong learning that are integrated with the mainstream educational activity and can provide a clear lead for educational developments within HEIs.

Making HE more amenable to lifelong learners will entail changes to institutional practices on admissions, teaching, curriculum structure, course locations and timing, as well as the content of programmes. My research was able to cover only some of these aspects but has enabled me to identify a range of practical changes to policies, processes and practices that may help HEIs address individual needs for lifelong learning. These are discussed in the remainder of this section.

Admission and entry

HE will be more likely to address learners' needs if they can gain entry to the 'right' course. A diverse HE system offers choice but also more opportunity for confusion and mistaken choices. As my study showed, pressure on institutions and departments to fill places can lead to places being offered to students who lack the necessary learning skills to benefit from those courses. A post-qualification HE admissions

system would be more appropriate for non-traditional entrants especially in the 'Returner' category as I have identified they are often developing their intellectual strengths in academic disciplines during the year preceding entry.

Payne and McNair (undated) find it is common for students to end up on an unsuitable course and indicate that there is a need for advice and guidance within the admissions procedures of HEIs so that adult learners can choose opportunities that meet their needs and circumstances. They advocate the Open University procedure of contacting all students without formal qualifications or evidence of recent study and offering advice on how to prepare for HE. Also, Payne and McNair indicate that if individuals are to use HEIs more flexibly across their life span, they will need better support to help them understand, plan and manage their learning careers, thus there will need to be a substantial expansion and development of tutoring and guidance services.

As a starting point, my research has shown that new and more innovative ways of dissemination of information on HE are needed. Ways of reaching adult learners can be identified by surveying current mature students regarding where they got their information and what other sources would have been helpful. Then publicity can be targeted at sites that are frequented by potential students, for example public libraries, FE colleges and adult education centres, community and health centres. As mature students are often juggling roles, open days should involve the whole family and provide activities for children while the adults attend talks and receive advice about studying. Biographies of adult role models on posters, leaflets and a web-site would help stimulate initial interest and also help overcome the image of HE as predominantly for young people which Schuller has observed (see Bunting, 2002). It is also important to prepare institutional staff to handle an increased level of enquiries from adult students (HEFCE, 2002). FE college lecturers are a major source of advice and encouragement for mature students to consider HE and this link should be considerably developed.

A student's first encounter with HE should be a positive experience but the admissions process, especially the selection interview, is often daunting for applicants not used to academic procedures. Admissions may be handled by 'Academic traditionalists' (Williams, 1997) who have concerns about mature students lowering standards, or perhaps by tutors with little understanding of adult learners. Academic departments should ensure that admissions tutors are sympathetic and welcoming to mature students, and use selection methods that provide a reliable and fair assessment of their aptitude for HE. A number of HEIs have recognised the need for greater professionalism in the admission process and a UCAS qualification has recently been developed for admissions staff (*THES*, 2003).

Access programmes and the Engineering Foundation programme were used by students in my study to prepare for their degree but shortcomings were identified and I suggest these should be reviewed to ensure they continue to address the needs of lifelong learners in the 21st century. Access programmes may need some development to include more diagnostic and guidance elements for adults who do not have firm ideas on what to study at degree level; subject coverage should provide for access to a range of disciplines, and mathematics in particular should be routinely available. Review of the Engineering Foundation programme should consider its appropriateness for increasingly specialised technology degrees especially those in the newer technologies. More generally, changes are needed so that science and engineering courses become more accessible to mature students. Standpoints that such courses are inappropriate for 'Returners' since scientific knowledge moves at a rapid pace, only add weight to the arguments for the development of skills of learning to learn rather than a content dominated curriculum (McNair, 1998; Smith and Spurling, 1999).

Teaching and learning

Induction is important to enable new students of all ages to settle in quickly to the learning process, but many mature students will need more support than traditional

full-time students in the early stages of the first term (see Bourgeois, op cit; Payne and McNair, op cit). My study has confirmed that those who enter without formal qualifications need particular support at the beginning of their courses and those who progress from Access courses miss the supportive and encouraging atmosphere that characterises such courses. Pre-entry programmes for mature students in the form of a pre-enrolment induction event can help adults overcome their lack of confidence on returning to learning, for example, the 'Older and Bolder' event at the University of Teesside (HEFCE, 2002). A diagnostic process should be built into induction or the early part of the programme so that an assessment can be made of the skills and needs of students and to determine the nature of support needed at vulnerable points in their student careers (McNair, 1997). Where students are progressing from Access courses, this process can begin before commencing a degree course.

Within a mass HE system with large classes, complex timetables and diverse student groups, the on-programme student experience no longer provides a close staff-student and student-student interaction within a campus-based learning system. McInnis (2001) advises that an integrated experience whereby social interaction adds value to the intellectual outcome will not happen by itself, and therefore efforts are needed to create a sense of a learning community. Learning communities are often grouped around subject themes; and the aim is to design and manage learning experiences that increase the amount of time students can interact with peers and academics as well as help create a sense of student identity (ibid:9).

In Chapter 2, I outlined the learning approaches that are regarded as appropriate to adult learners including small group co-operative learning, discussion of ideas, and reflection on experience. Good practice indicates that tutors should adopt a more interactive approach and modify their teaching styles when adults are in their groups (Brookfield, 1986). Fortunately, adjustments to methods of learning, teaching and assessment to meet the needs of mature students have been found in practice to benefit *all* students (HEFCE, op cit). However, academic staff are not equally able to adjust

their pedagogical approaches, nor are they equally at ease with different student groups of full-time, mature and post-experience students (Watson and Taylor, 1999). More importantly, a large part of the problem in achieving lifelong learning in HE is that there is no shared vision of it among staff. There is thus a need for a large programme of staff development. HEFCE (op cit) advises that offering staff development may not be a dependable driver for change in attitudes since attendance at voluntary training can be poor or by the 'already converted'. One approach is to make attendance at workshops compulsory for all academic staff and senior technical staff, or to attract staff by aiming at more general issues such as student-focused teaching to increase retention rates (ibid:20).

The "Fryer Report" (NAGCELL, 1997) indicated a need for educational institutions to put learners before structure. To accommodate mature students this entails achieving a balance between flexibility, responsiveness and coherence (Henkel, 2001). Payne and McNair (op cit) point out that the norm is still considered to be the full-time, day-time, term-time degree course over 3 years, and this is a major obstacle to the development of HEIs as lifelong learning institutions. Attention to the length and timing of courses is required so that adults can take their learning in manageable pieces and integrate HE into the rest of their lives. Other practical considerations required to address the needs of mature students include providing information on timetables, attendance and course requirements well in advance so that, for example, domestic and childcare arrangements can be made; and being more accommodating of personal reasons for flexibility in terms of deadlines.

Learning support

The participants in my research spent little time on campus and conformed to the observed trends for students in general to withdraw/disengage from day to day campus life (McInnis, 2001; CHERI, 2003b). The implication is that HEIs need to rethink their provision of expensive facilities and consider developing their support services

for off-campus students. Halls of residence, which were central to the notion of residential initial education for young people, may become a lower priority than the crèche for mature people needing childcare (Haselgrove, 1994; Payne and McNair, op cit). Student facilities that are appropriate for adults such as coffee bars and student common rooms need to be provided. A major study in Australia which looked at supporting lifelong learning in undergraduate courses identified that student support services linked with lifelong learning outcomes are libraries and learning resource centres; computer-based education facilities; and study skills and learning support units. It was concluded that the best way of harnessing the "reservoir of experience" in these units is through treating staff who work in them as full and equal partners in the design and delivery of the learning process and by routinely building support into undergraduate programmes (Candy, 2000:115).

My research has shown that it is important that study skills are integrated into the regular academic work of students as techniques learnt in short courses do not transfer easily to the context of a subject. Where 'mainstreaming' of under-represented groups such as adult learners is common, attention should be given to providing a study support system adapted to the demands of the discipline (HEFCE, 2002). This would entail tailored support from a tutor/mentor who understands and has empathy with adult learners' needs. In addition, peer mentoring enables students to gain from each other's experiences and share resources, and in this regard is particularly appropriate to the learning styles of adults (McNair, 1997). Other means of providing support for a more diverse student population include electronic support such as dedicated bulletin boards and e-mail discussion forums for mature students. As the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in learning grows, HEIs need to have a strategy for supporting students not only with development of computing and information retrieval skills but also with off-campus support particularly as mature students do not use on-campus facilities. In my study, it was suggested there should be arrangements to purchase ICT equipment via the university to gain the benefits of large buyer discounts.

A number of steps can be taken to overcome the barriers to library use by mature students. At an early stage, there should be provision for diagnosis and help with literacy and numeracy difficulties (Hull, 2001). Academic staff should create curricula activities that entail systematic enquiry among learning resources, and not assume that mature students will spend time in the library. Within the library, facilities to encourage greater use include independent study carousels rather than open plan areas, and syndicate rooms for small group discussions. Also, library borrowing arrangements should enable ease of access to mature and part-time students, for example, by establishing a special section of the library where they can take out books on more convenient terms which reflect the many demands that impinge on their role as learners. The support arrangements for students who are living off campus should be made clearer; for example, at Loughborough University there is a dedicated student handbook for off-campus students (CHERI, 2003a).

Assessment and feedback

Assessment and feedback arrangements have been shown as particularly important to mature students, many of who have a lack of self-confidence in their academic ability. Therefore, adults need a curriculum that develops incrementally with formative assessment and feedback that builds confidence. Young (2000) has indicated the benefit of brief tutorials when work is returned especially early in the programme, to help build students' understanding of the standards required and their own abilities. My research has also shown the need for a variety of assessment methods to suit different learning abilities, help with revision and examination techniques, and the importance to mature students of avoiding conflicting assessment deadlines.

Section 4: Conclusions and reflections

I have outlined changes that would enable HE to more effectively address the needs of adult learners like those in my sample. I have shown that HE is clearly opening its doors to mature and non-traditional students. But inside the doors, they often find the same kinds of rituals, conventions, and practices as have been in place for many years, reflecting the dominance of a young person culture, for example in admissions, teaching and learning, and learning support. My research shows that the mature student experience of HE is different to the traditional campus-based experience which has dominated discourse to date, and that the processes and structures which are necessary to support lifelong learning are only slowly moving into place.

The ideas for change within institutions that I have advanced are unlikely to be addressed without appropriate funding. In particular, support processes that are tailored to the needs of adult students are especially important for lifelong learning to become a reality. However, while government funding in HE is targeted at the 18-30 age group, the needs of adults are neglected. In addition, student funding arrangements have been shown in my study, to be a significant disincentive to returning to learning unless personal sources of finance are available. Thus, there are significant hurdles to be overcome for HE to meet the challenge of an expanded role in the provision of lifelong learning.

Opportunities for further research

Lea and West (1995) questioned how far HE is able to respond to the challenge of mature students and the need to connect their academic and more personal worlds. The experience of the adults in my study indicates that HE is still very much geared to the needs of younger students and that adults studying in HE inhabit parallel, not interconnected worlds. However my sample was limited and there is scope for further biographical research to shed further light on these issues. McInnis (2001:11) has

stated that we simply do not know enough about the changing motives, values and expectations of undergraduates, and I apply this to adult students in general.

Qualitative research on the mature student experience of HE would help to fill out the gaps in our understanding of their involvement – or lack of involvement - in the traditional social aspects of the HE experience. I have suggested (see page 106) that provision for more social interaction could support the learning experience of mature students. I observed (see page 103) that placing mature students in tutorial or seminar groups of similarly aged students initially helped them to adapt to the demands of HE study, and suggest that this would merit further study. Postgraduate research students formed a sub-group of the participants in my study but they represent a large proportion of learners in HE (Burgess, 1997). Ways of supporting this section of the student body would be particularly worthy of further investigation.

Reflections on research methodology

The biographical method has enabled me to explore what adult students are seeking from HE study and the significance of aspects of their learning experience in meeting their needs and expectations. Drawing on a wide spectrum of literature covering motivation and learning theory, and studies of adult learners' experiences within HE, I was able to construct a framework for interpreting the meanings that participants ascribed to their experiences. I have analysed and interpreted the data in relation to the research questions that I set at the start but am conscious that I have had to be selective and much has been omitted in the final report.

On reflection, the questions were rather wide and might have been better addressed by a longitudinal study over the full period of the participants' degree courses. This would have given a clearer picture of what I perceived were changing aspirations and motivations during the experience of learning. For example, participants responded differently when asked what attracted them to HE and what they hoped to achieve.

This may demonstrate how the language used by an interviewer can influence the data collected, as Lunneborg (1997) indicated, but equally, I am aware that people may have difficulty articulating their motives, or may re-interpret them with hindsight (Riessman, 1993; Page, 1998). West (1996) also identified that our understanding of student motivation is limited because learners themselves have rarely been encouraged to reflect on their reasons for educational participation and learning in the context of past as well as present lives. The merit of the biographical approach is that I was able to explore the reasons and meanings that participants gave to their actions and experiences in comparison to survey and questionnaire methods which would require participants to chose between pre-determined factors that may not reflect their view of the world.

List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Biographical profiles

Appendix 2: Letter sent to tutors

Appendix 3: Briefing paper for interviewees

Appendix 4: Reply form for potential interviewees

Appendix 5: Interview Plan

Appendix 6: Agenda for initial meeting

Appendix 7: Notes of Guidance for interviewees and Agreement Form

Appendix 1: Biographical profiles

Anthony

Initial Education
Attended Grammar School, didn't do as well as hoped in 'O' levels. Started three science 'A' Levels, but hated school and home life and dropped out at 17.

Employment
Spent 3 years in the Air force from 17 to 20, then a further 3 years in a series of dead end temporary jobs. After graduating, held a series of jobs in community education, and began to contemplate a career in higher education.

Further & Higher Education
Obtained a small grant and returned to college full-time at age 23 and completed 3 'A' levels in English, Economic History, and Sociology. Went on to read Philosophy at University College, London, 1978-1981, and enjoyed this time, supporting himself with a regular job during summer vacations. In the early 1990's, undertook a part-time M.Ed. at Edinburgh University for vocational reasons, and gained distinctions in assessments.

Now
Working in a government agency concerned with adult education. From 1999, registered for a part-time PhD in Education, on an ESRC scholarship. While he relishes the intellectual stimulation, he is finding it a struggle to combine full-time work and study.

Ben

Initial Education
Attended a comprehensive school and left at 16 with CSEs. Did the bare minimum academically having made an early career decision to be a police officer.

Employment
In the Police Cadet Scheme from 1975-78, then Hampshire Constabulary as a police officer until medical retirement in 1998. At that point, had no plans for further employment.

Further & Higher Education
As part of the Police Cadet Scheme, spent the first year at college. He didn't want to be there, and failed end of year exams. Returned to the same college in 1998 to do 'A' levels in Law and English as a hobby. Enjoyed the courses and a tutor planted the idea of going on to HE. Decided to do a Law degree, and achieved the required 2 Bs at 'A' level for admission to university.

Now
Commenced a Law degree in 1999 and had a difficult first year due to poor exam and study techniques. Has now successfully completed year 2 and has an ambition to become a criminal law barrister. After graduating, this will involve a further year of study on the Bar Vocational Course at the London Inns of Court School of Law and then getting a 12 month pupillage at Chambers.

Sally

Initial Education
The youngest of 5 children, her mother allowed her to stay off school a lot. Didn't enjoy secondary school and left at age 14 with no qualifications.

Employment
As a mature 14 year old was able to gain employment in the travel industry, and progressed into tele-sales. Began a family at 18, and continued to work part-time in family-run pubs. When her husband got a job, she gave up work to look after the children, and undertook an IT course with the idea of working in the sector. Asked to help out at a nursing home run by her mother, she ended up staying for 5 years, nursing terminally ill people.

Further & Higher Education
While children were young, completed a 6 month IT course. On the break-up of her marriage, decided to return to education to improve her employability. Completed an Access course and encouraged by the course tutor, progressed to a degree in population science at university, but dropped out towards the end of the first year.

Now
Helped by the Student Advice Centre, transferred courses and is now undertaking a 3 year full-time BSc Health and Well-being course, with a view to working in this sector on graduation.

Katie

Initial Education
Didn't try very hard at school, and gained CSEs and one 'O' level, then went on to technical college and gained a further 3 'O' levels. Had no ambitions or career interests.

Employment
Initially on a YTS scheme, after a few months she gained employment as an administrative assistant with a government agency followed by promotion to officer level. She gave up work when she started a family. On return to the job market, she did some short term jobs but got bored and felt she needed to better herself by getting some qualifications.

Further & Higher Education
When a friend gained a place on an Access course, this provided the spur to follow suit. Completed a one year Access course and a Maths GCSE. Towards the end of the year, a tutor provided the encouragement to go on to HE. A degree place was offered on condition she gained a 60 per cent pass in the Access course and a grade C in Maths.

Now
With an interest in sports and health issues, chose to follow the 3 year full-time BSc Health and Well-being course. Commenced in 2000 and has successfully completed the first year. Ultimately, hopes to follow a career in the health field.

Maria

Initial Education

Attended a new community school where she enjoyed the sports facilities but did not do as well academically as her twin brother who got more attention from teachers. Left school at 16 with no career goal in mind while her twin went on to college.

Employment

On leaving school, her first job was in an office doing general clerical duties for 2 years, then she worked in a bank for 6 years. After starting a family, decided not to return to work, and considered returning to study and taking a different career direction.

Further & Higher Education

Completed banking exams during employment but otherwise did no further education until completing a full-time Access course at college. A couple of friends who had done Access courses recommended this as a quick way for a mature student to access HE. Encouraged by the course tutor, she focused on social science subjects with a view to continuing these at university. Passing the Access course gave a guaranteed place at university.

Now

Undertaking a full-time degree in Applied Social Sciences, specialising in Community and Voluntary Sector Studies. In retrospect, would have preferred a more scientific subject, but it was not possible to change as she has no Maths qualification.

Ellen

Initial Education

Left school at 17 with 'O' levels, having stayed on an extra year, but did not get as good grades as hoped. Father had completed HE and she felt pressure to progress, so with no clear ideas about what she wanted to do, she went on to further education.

Employment

Initially worked in hotel and catering. Had an enjoyable 6 month sandwich course placement in a hotel, and returned there for 6 or 7 years. Through a friend, she gained an opportunity to spend 6 months abroad in a caring role, and on return to the UK, continued in care work for 5 years, but she was disappointed with the training opportunities offered. Also did voluntary work which lead to her interest in degree subject.

Further & Higher Education

Spent 4 years studying hotel and catering at a further education college near to home, then 2 years on a Hotel and Catering Institutional Management Association sandwich course. About 10 years later, while working in the care sector, she undertook a 2 year part-time counselling course, partly paid for by her employer. This gave her the taste for education; the tutor was very positive about going on to HE, so being fed up with her job, she decided to apply.

Now

Undertaking a full-time BSc in Applied Social Sciences, specialising in Community and Voluntary Sector Studies with a view to taking up a career in the sector.

Pat

Initial Education
Both parents were professionals, and she grew up in a family that encouraged higher education. She stayed at school to 18, but didn't do as well as anticipated in 'A' levels due to changes to the curriculum midway during the sixth form of her private school, and did not get a place at university. She had an interest in catering and went on to an HND programme.

Employment
Immediately on completion of the HND, commenced work supervising school catering. Moved to catering in the private sector until giving up her career to have a family in the early 1980s. Later resumed employment as a trainer in catering, and after several job changes, took on a managerial job with a national brief. More recently, joined the management team at a college and has responsibility for business development.

Further & Higher Education
Completed an HND in Institutional Management from age 18 to 21. The vocational focus continued after maternity. To gain qualifications, and because she did a lot of teaching, she completed an FE teacher training certificate, followed by a Certificate of Education.

Now
Shortly after commencing a new job, is undertaking a part-time Certificate in Business Administration course which her employer is part sponsoring.

Lisa

Initial Education
Attended a co-educational grammar school, and with a professional father and elder sister at university, she was expected to go on to HE. She achieved 9 'O' levels, but didn't work hard and 'flunked' her 'A' levels. Interested in art, she commenced a diploma course at Art College, but hated it, dropped out, and got a place on a degree programme.

Employment
After graduation, on a whim, responded to a Royal Navy advertisement and joined as a Wren in the Cadet Entry Scheme. After serving 8 years, returned to civilian employment and has subsequently had three periods of redundancy and unemployment. Her most recent employment was in a quality management role in a government-related sector where she was made redundant after 6 years service.

Further & Higher Education
Completed a BA in Humanities at a London polytechnic from 1973-76. Didn't enjoy this period, and left with no clear career plans. While in the Wrens, completed a full-time postgraduate diploma in management at Shrivenham, Royal Military College of Science.

Now
The catalyst for returning to HE was redundancy. Undertaking a BSc in Podiatry having developed an interest in the subject through her experience with foot problems in the Navy. After graduating, her aim is to commence a new career, and ultimately be self-employed.

Lynn

Initial Education
Loved going to school, but had little parental encouragement, and she didn't try particularly hard. Gained 8 CSEs, and went on to college for a year to do a Diploma in Business Studies with a view to taking up office work. She really enjoyed Maths and book-keeping.

Employment
At 17, went to work in an office of a local firm but was given computer work which she didn't find interesting. After 3 years, changed jobs but this did not work out as anticipated. She took up temporary factory work and ended up staying for 5 years, gaining a variety of job skills. Gave up work to have a family. Got back into employment through helping as a classroom assistant in her daughter's infants' school. Enjoying this, she gained an incentive to get qualifications to become a teacher.

Further & Higher Education
While bringing up her family, she did some evening classes, but no other education until undertaking a 6 week Access taster at a local venue which gave the confidence to go on to a one year full-time Access course. Additionally, she did GCSEs in Maths and English.

Now
With an initial aim to be a teacher, is undertaking a full-time BA in English with Psychology, although she is now "dreaming" of doing a PhD.

Martha

Initial Education
From primary school, has seen herself as a conscientious, academic-type person. Her mother went to university, and teachers' expectations were that she would go on to university too. Attended a sixth form college, and like many of her classmates, she progressed to Oxbridge.

Employment
On completion of her first degree, was interested in working in the voluntary sector, and as a possible way in, got a job as a research assistant in the area of human rights education. Then held a graduate management trainee post in the public sector for a year, but realised that research fitted her personality better than managing people. Worked as an educational researcher for 4 years, with employer support for undertaking a part-time PhD. Gave up her job after maternity.

Further & Higher Education
Completed a degree in modern history at Oxford University finding the whole experience very positive. Then did a part-time Masters in Educational Studies while working as a research assistant for 2 years.

Now
Undertaking a PhD in Sociology and Social Policy, with ESRC funding, initially part-time, but now full-time in combination with child care. The degree will be an advantage for a future career in social policy research.

Judy

Initial Education
Attended a private girls' school, leaving at 16 with 8 'O' levels. Worked for a year then went to a local college to do 3 'A' levels but did not treat studying seriously and only sat and passed one 'A' level. Parents were business people and the idea of progressing to HE did not arise.

Employment
At 16, drifted into a job in a bank, but left after a year. Had a series of jobs before joining the Civil Service in the early 1980s, later reducing to part-time hours to accommodate her caring responsibilities. With a supportive employer, she has been able to combine full-time study with part-time working, and is currently on a career break for 5 years with an option to return.

Further & Higher Education
After the break-up of her marriage, decided to get some qualifications that would help get a better job. Found out the requirements for a degree in Sociology, and returned to education in 1995, taking a part-time 'A' level in Sociology and a Maths 'O' level. From 1996 to 1999, completed a BSc in Social Policy, and the following year, an MSc in Research Methods.

Now
Undertaking a part-time PhD in Social Policy on a topic related to her employment, with an ESRC grant. Career plans remain flexible in view of childcare responsibilities.

Jim

Initial Education
Has negative memories of a secondary modern school where there was bullying, and he under-achieved, leaving with CSEs. With supportive parents, he had a private tutor for English lessons, and stayed on at school to age 16 because his father was keen that he got a trade apprenticeship.

Employment
Commenced an apprenticeship in plumbing and left after 3 months. Went into a clerical post where he was very happy and stayed 5 years, moving on to get better pay. Got a clerical job with a large materials manufacturing company and stayed 19 years. With automation, his job was made redundant, giving the opportunity to return to education, while at the same time taking over childcare to enable his wife to return to her career after maternity.

Further & Higher Education
Had always enjoyed reading, and felt he had missed out by not having done a degree. In 1997, returned to education to do 2 GCSEs in English and History. The following year, he did an 'A' level in English and a Sociology GCSE with the aim of going to university. He got a grade C in the 'A' level, rather than the B that was specified, and although a university place was offered, he decided to defer entrance and do a further 'A' level.

Now
Commenced a full-time degree in English in autumn 2000 and now has an aspiration to continue to a higher degree.

Danny

Initial Education
Positive memories of school, enjoying himself and doing just enough to pass. Gained 3 'A' levels, and wanted to do engineering in the Navy, but the Maths grade wasn't high enough. Father was a successful businessman and discouraged HE.

Employment
At 19, after a year off sailing around the world, started work in his father's company which was concerned with life-saving appliances for ships. Starting on the technical side, he moved into sales and then management, based at various locations throughout the world. After marriage in the early 1990's, took a less stressful job in sail making, but gradually realised he needed more challenge.

Further & Higher Education
The idea of university was suggested by a family member, who had worked in HE, and he is supported by a working wife. As he has always wanted to be an engineer, and has practical experience in the marine industry, he decided to do a degree course in ship science.

Now
Has completed a one year university foundation course in engineering, physics and maths as a preparation for the ship science degree course. Longer term, aims to become a Chartered Engineer in 5 years and then work in marine engineering.

Hans

Initial Education
Grew up in East Germany, in a high ranking family who valued education. At school he found practical subjects easy, and progressed to high school, completing an apprenticeship in nuclear hydraulics.

Employment
Worked for a period as an inspector in the nuclear power industry before joining the army, following a family military tradition. Defected to West Germany in 1987, where he joined the car industry and learnt about computerisation. Came to England in 1989 and met his wife, and has done a range of jobs, but been unable to get a job in computing. More recently, had an accident at work which has left a permanent disability, and he was made redundant.

Further & Higher Education
Has qualifications from his early career, but has been unable to obtain proof of these. In recent years, has completed OCR certificates in computing at a local college in his own time. The work accident has provided the stimulus to re-educate himself for a desk job by doing a computer engineering degree.

Now
Has completed a one year university engineering foundation course and hopes to go on to a four year Masters in Engineering course specialising in computer engineering. A longer term interest is to do research in nano-technology for medical care.

Carol

Initial Education
Attended a girls' grammar school and, as a clever child who enjoyed school, received encouragement to go on to HE. Interested in the sciences, she did 3 'A' levels and then a Diploma in Biochemistry.

Employment
Initially worked in food science and nutrition in a hospital environment, then chose to go into teaching. With restructuring and the closure of the college science department, she transferred to the education unit to do teacher training. For promotion and wider experience, took up an academic development post in HE, and tutoring for the Open University.

Further & Higher Education
Diploma in Biochemistry, 3 years full-time to become a nutritionist.
Returned to HE at age 25 to follow a one year course to gain qualified teacher status.
Completed a 3 year part-time B.Ed. in Biological Sciences to gain a first degree.
Undertook a part-time M.Sc. in Education Studies after the transfer into teacher training.
Commenced an Open University MBA course at the same time as her job move into HE.
Subsequently decided to do a doctorate, benefiting from credits gained on the MBA.

Now
From 1999, registered for a part-time Ed.D. as this was relevant to her employment in HE and she enjoys mental stimulation. She is now working in a government agency concerned with adult education.

Appendix 2: Letter sent to tutors

Dear Dr xxx

Your name has been recommended to me because of your involvement with courses that attract a number of mature students. I hope that you may know of one or two students studying engineering who might be willing to participate in my research project.

I am planning to talk to people drawn from a wide spread of university courses with the aim of identifying the implications of increasingly individuated learning pathways in higher education. The enclosed paper describes the research in more detail and lists the characteristics of the people who I am seeking to contact. I should be most grateful if you could pass on the enclosed envelopes to anybody who meets these criteria.

If you do not know of any students who might be willing to participate, perhaps you could pass this letter and enclosures to a colleague who may be able to help.

Please telephone or e-mail me if you would like to know more about my research.

With thanks for your help,

Yours sincerely,

Elaine Crosthwaite

Appendix 3: Briefing paper for interviewees

<u>Elaine Crosthwaite:</u>
<u>Research on the student experience of lifelong learning</u>

I am a research student in the School of Education at Southampton University. Until recently, I was employed by Hampshire Training & Enterprise Council. Prior to that, I worked for many years in higher education as a lecturer and manager.

In the context of national and local initiatives to encourage lifelong learning, my research is about the experiences of adults who return to learning in higher education. I am interested in looking beyond the practical difficulties of gaining access to, and funding higher education, in order to explore the implications of increasingly individuated learning pathways. I should like to talk to people across a wide age range, and who:

- have had a gap of at least 5 years since completing initial full-time education,
- have returned to learning on either a full-time or part-time basis, and
- are currently enrolled on a course of higher education at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

I hope to meet with people in the Southampton area who would be willing to participate in an interview lasting about one hour. The interview will focus on the motivation for higher level learning, how higher education is experienced as an adult, and the influences on individual choices about learning in the future. The research will not seek to make any objective evaluation of the degree programmes being followed by participants.

My timetable is to undertake the individual interviews between May to August 2001. Prior to an interview, an initial meeting will be held with anyone who may be interested in helping me with this research. At this meeting, I will explain the study in more detail, discuss issues of confidentiality and any other points of concern. Anyone who agrees to this meeting would be under no obligation to continue as a participant, and those who do continue would be free to withdraw at any point.

The interview will be tape-recorded and a transcript will be prepared for editing as the participant sees fit. The participants in this research will obviously be people who are already very busy, so I will seek to find the most convenient times and places for each meeting.

Appendix 4: Reply form for potential interviewees

STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

1.   Have you had a gap of at least 5 years since completing initial full-time education?

2.   Have you returned to learning on a full or part-time basis?

3.   Are you currently enrolled on a course of higher education?

4.   Would you be willing to meet with me and talk about your experience for the purposes of research?

If you can answer "yes" to all the above questions, please complete the form below and post it to me in the envelope provided. If you are unable to participate, please pass on this letter to somebody who might be able.

When I receive your form, I will contact you to arrange a short meeting to talk about my study in more detail. You can then decide whether or not you would like to be involved.

<u>Elaine Crosthwaite</u>

Name:_____

Address:_____

_____

Telephone:_____E-mail:_____

Best times to ring:_____

Preferred place to meet (please indicate):

--   At your home

--   At the University

--   Another venue, e.g. pub, cafe (please specify)

Appendix 5: Interview Plan

Elaine Crosthwaite:
Research on the student experience of lifelong learning

Interview Plan

Please use these pages to make notes or prompts for anything you would like to say.

Initial full-time education and main life stages

What are your main memories of school?

Were you academically successful?

What were your career interests at that stage?

What did you do after school - did you progress to further or higher education, employment, or what?

What were the subject(s) studied, full- or part-time, approximate dates and your age at the time of each period of HE?

What employment experience have you had?

Route into Higher Education

When did the idea of undertaking HE first arise for you? Did you always assume that you would enter HE one day?

What influenced your choice of subjects, and where to study?

In what way were you helped, or encouraged, by parents, friends, your teachers/lecturers, or others?

Initial experience of Higher Education   *(Where applicable)*

What was it like, and how did you feel when you started to study in HE?

What did you like about HE - what were the positive aspects?

What were the negative aspects - were there any obstacles that you had to deal with?

In what way did your initial experience of HE influence your current choices?

Current experience of Higher Education

What HE programme are you currently following? How are you getting on?

What was it that attracted you back to HE after a gap of several years?

In what way has this been different to your first experience? *(Where applicable)*

What are you hoping to achieve from this programme?

Do you anticipate any difficulties achieving this goal?

What keeps you going (despite any difficulties)?

Is a vocational focus important to you? Does the subject interest you?

Have your studies impacted on your home life?   Have you got the support of your family / partner?

How does it feel, returning to learning in HE as an adult student?

How do you feel HE is supporting you as an older student?

Are there any aspects of the HE experience that you would like to see improved?
e.g. access to tutors, library, computer system or other resources & facilities;
        or procedures like the enrolment process, assessment arrangements.

Have you taken up any concerns with the course team or institution?

Lifelong learning

What will influence your choice of learning opportunities in future?

What might prevent you from taking up these opportunities?

What will encourage you to return to HE for lifelong learning?

What changes are required so that HE can more effectively meet individual needs for lifelong learning?

Conclusion

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experience as a student in higher education?

Close interview, thank interviewee, and stop the tape. Explain what happens next.

Appendix 6: Agenda for Initial Meeting

AGENDA FOR INITIAL MEETING

1. Introduce self and background (higher education; personnel & training)

2. Explain research interests - check receipt of Research Brief

3. Obtain brief information about respondent

   Course and year of study
   Previous education
   Employment experience

4. Go through the NOTES FOR GUIDANCE

   Assure that they can refuse to answer any questions, and withdraw at any stage.
   Emphasise confidentiality

5. Complete AGREEMENT FORM

   Sign 2 copies, each keep one copy

6. Issue INTERVIEW PLAN

   Explain the questions are just prompts to focus thoughts on past, present and future education.
   The pages can be used to make notes or prompts in advance of the interview.

7. Explain that I may make occasional notes during the interview, but I will largely rely on the tape recording

8. Check whether any questions or concerns

9. Arrange date, time and venue for interview

10. Get e-mail contact details

Appendix 7:
Notes of Guidance for Interviewees and Agreement Form

THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO LIFELONG LEARNING - A STUDY OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

A STUDY BEING UNDERTAKEN BY ELAINE CROSTHWAITE

NOTES OF GUIDANCE FOR INTERVIEWEES & AGREEMENT FORM

This research project is concerned to understand how higher education addresses the needs of lifelong learners. The methodology involves conducting an interview with a view to understanding the motivation for learning, and how higher education is experienced by learners, in the context of the individual's life history and personal circumstances.

Each interview will be tape recorded and last about an hour.
You have an absolute right to refuse to answer any questions asked and can withdraw from the research at any time and will not be required to give reasons.

Confidentiality is important. To preserve your anonymity, you will be asked to suggest a fictitious name for yourself and for any other person (relation, friend, etc.) who is mentioned in the conversation. The material is to be used for research purposes only, and will not be published to a wider audience without getting your permission first.

As soon as possible after the interview, you will be given a transcript of your interview, and if you wish, a copy of your interview tape. You may edit the transcript as you see fit, and I would be grateful if you could return the final form of the transcript within two weeks.

AGREEMENT FORM

I agree to take part in the research project on these terms.

Signed:_____to be known as:_____

Signed:_____(Elaine Crosthwaite, Research Student)

Date: _____

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