Widening Participation to Higher Education for Adult Learners: The Past Matters

Thesis

How to cite:

© 2021 Wendy Fowle

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Redacted Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.000140aa

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
WIDENING PARTICIPATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ADULT LEARNERS:
THE PAST MATTERS

Wendy Fowle

Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology

Doctorate in Education

7th February 2022
Abstract

The study explores the concept of transformative learning within the context of widening participation (WP) to higher education (HE) for adult learners. It brings together the domains of adult education, lifelong learning, adult learning and widening participation. The research questioned the extent to which approaches to WP to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners. Sub-questions explored how past educational experiences impact on adult learners and how the perceptions of adult learners could impact approaches to WP. Within the theoretical concept of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) I adopted a qualitative, interpretative method of enquiry through semi-structured interviews within the case study of adult learners engaged in a WP programme. I use the theoretical frameworks of transformative learning theory and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994) alongside models of learning adopted by Illeris (2017) and Jarvis (2006) to reflect on their applicability to the case study. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with students who had engaged with preparatory and introductory HE courses. I was able to draw on my professional experience of embedding policy into practice to support adult learners into HE, recognising their distinct characteristics (McGivney, 1990; Stuart and Thomson, 1995; McGivney, 1996; Bamber and Tett, 2000), multiple identities (Waller, 2006; Butcher, 2015b; Mallman and Lee, 2016) and past experiences of education (Merrill, 2004; Askham, 2008; Goodchild, 2017). The main findings suggest that issues experienced as participants returned to learning were similar to those that they experienced during compulsory education, despite dedicated WP programmes. Findings suggest that pedagogical as well as dispositional, structural, institutional and situational barriers (Gorard, 2006) should be considered when supporting adult learners in and through their HE learning journey. In addition, the discourse around WP aimed at school children could reflect the concept of ‘lifelong participation’, whereby individual aspirations are positioned equally alongside those of WP practitioners.
Dedication

My thesis is dedicated to my old circuit trainer, Peter Hastings. He once said to me:

‘If Jasmine [my daughter] has as much self-motivation and determination as you, she will be OK in life.’

This comment is certainly true, reflecting on the motivation required over the past few years since I began my doctorate.

Peter was a strong, jovial man from Newcastle who inspired everyone who attended his classes, motivating them to achieve the very best they could. Sadly, as I was completing my End of Year 1 report, Peter took his own life. Peter was obviously dealing with some very deep-rooted issues which, to everybody who met him, were invisible. This epitomises the foundations of my research which teaches us to look beyond the obvious and challenge our assumptions.
Acknowledgements

There are so many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude in supporting me to complete my doctorate. My friends, particularly Shirley, Natalie and Lindsey gave their time to read through and comment on the vignettes. My colleagues, Caroline and Lesley helped me conduct mock interviews to test out my methodology, providing me with invaluable constructive feedback that enabled me to get the most out of my interviews with research participants. My main supervisor, colleague and friend, John, supported me not only professionally, but also personally on the many journeys we have undertaken together over the past few years.

But of course, I could not have done any of this without the support of my family. My parents have supported me to achieve whatever ambitions I set myself. My children accepted unquestioningly that my laptop goes wherever I go, that there would be many weekends spent locked in my office and countless days of holiday when I couldn’t enjoy their fun! I hope seeing the hard work that has gone into my EdD will inspire you all to follow your dreams and ambitions. You are all amazing and will go on to do great things.

And finally, the biggest thanks must go to my husband. Without him taking care of the children and our home and providing me with the stability and level-headedness that I needed along my EdD journey, I would not be in a position to be submitting my thesis.

Thank you all so much, from the bottom of my heart.
Table of contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2
Dedication ........................................................................................................................................ 3
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 4
Table of contents ............................................................................................................................. 5
Table of figures ............................................................................................................................... 9
Table of tables ................................................................................................................................. 9
Chapter 1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 10
  1.1. The context of widening participation to HE ................................................................. 10
  1.2. The OU as a widening participation institution ............................................................. 14
  1.3. Rationale for the study ...................................................................................................... 15
  1.4. The broad research question ........................................................................................... 21
  1.5. The position of the researcher ......................................................................................... 22
  2. Significance of the study ........................................................................................................ 24
    2.1. Structure of the thesis ........................................................................................................ 25
Chapter 2. Literature review .......................................................................................................... 27
  2.1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 27
  2.2. Adult learners returning to learning .................................................................................. 30
  2.3. The historical policy context of adult learning and widening participation ............... 31
  2.4. What is meant by lifelong learning? .................................................................................. 33
    2.4.1. Education or learning? .................................................................................................. 36
    2.4.2. The impact of the focus on lifelong ‘education’ by policymakers ............................. 37
  2.5. Widening participation to HE for adult learners ............................................................... 44
  2.6. Transformative learning ..................................................................................................... 48
    2.6.1. Measuring ‘success’ for adult learners ......................................................................... 50
    2.6.2. Learning through the life-course .................................................................................. 52
    2.6.3. Supporting transformative learning .............................................................................. 54
    2.6.4. Liberating minds .......................................................................................................... 57
  2.7. Chapter summary .................................................................................................................. 67
Chapter 3. Research design

3.1. Introduction

3.2. Research design

3.3. Ontological position

3.4. Robustness of qualitative research

3.5. Neutrality in qualitative research

3.6. Theoretical framework

3.7. My position as the researcher

3.8. Methodological framework

3.8.1. Case study research

3.8.2. The specific case study for this research project

3.9. Research methods

3.9.1. Interviewing as a qualitative research method

3.9.2. Interviewing and focus groups

3.9.3. Research methods in Phase 1 of the study

3.9.4. Interview structure and practical implementation

3.9.5. Consideration of other methods for later phases

3.10. Vignettes

3.10.1. Developing the vignettes

3.11. Triangulation

3.11.1. Interviews with tutors

3.11.2. Focus group with educational advisers

3.11.3. Interview with a national policymaker

3.12. Chapter summary

Chapter 4. Data collection and analysis

4.1. Introduction

4.2. Ethics

4.3. Piloting and phase 1

4.3.1. Sample criteria
6.3 Desire to learn ................................................................. 168
6.4 The individualised nature of learning ........................................ 173
6.5 Relationship with tutor ....................................................... 175
6.6 Relationship with other students ............................................. 180
   6.6.1 Active engagement ...................................................... 180
   6.6.2 Non-engagement ......................................................... 181
6.7 Chapter summary .............................................................. 184

Chapter 7. Conclusions and recommendations ...................................... 186
7.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 186
7.2 Widening participation to HE for adult learners .......................... 187
   7.2.1 Pathway 1 ................................................................. 187
   7.2.2 Pathway 2 ................................................................. 187
   7.2.3 Pathway 3 ................................................................. 188
   7.2.4 Pathway 4 ................................................................. 189
7.3 Research sub-question 1 ....................................................... 191
7.4 Research sub-question 2 ....................................................... 193
7.5 To what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners? ............................................................... 195
7.6 Implications of my research for my own professional practice ........ 197
7.7 Recommendations to the institution, HE sector and policymakers .......... 199
   7.7.1 For the OU ............................................................. 199
   7.7.2 For all HE providers .................................................. 199
   7.7.3 For policymakers ....................................................... 200
7.8 Limitations of the research .................................................... 201
7.9 Contribution to knowledge ..................................................... 202
7.10 Opportunities for further research .......................................... 204
7.11 Reflections on my EdD journey ............................................. 205

References ................................................................................. 207
Appendices ................................................................................. 238
Appendix 1 The Open University ................................................................. 238
Appendix 2 Employability of Qualifiers Survey .................................................. 240
Appendix 3 The Open University’s Access Programme ........................................ 241
Appendix 4 Student Experience at the End of a Module Survey ................................. 243
Appendix 5 Participant consent form ..................................................................... 245
Appendix 6 Pilot study participant information leaflet ............................................. 247
Appendix 7 Pilot study interview schedule ............................................................. 250
Appendix 8 Main study participant Information Leaflet .......................................... 252
Appendix 9 Main study interview schedule ............................................................. 255
Appendix 10 Other participant information ........................................................... 258
Appendix 11 Example of data analysis using Powerpoint ......................................... 259

Table of figures
Figure 1 Literature review framework................................................................. 29
Figure 2. Jarvis’s model of learning (taken from Jarvis, 2009, p. 18) ....................... 60
Figure 3. Illeris’s three dimensions of learning and competence development .......... 62
Figure 4. The demographic breakdown of OU student data 2018/19 ......................... 79
Figure 5 Widening participation to HE for adult learners: A concept map ............... 190

Table of tables
Table 1 Stages of the life-course (adapted from Schuller and Watson, 2009) ............ 53
Table 2 Illeris’s phases of development ................................................................... 53
Table 3. Adult learners returning to learning framework ....................................... 63
Table 4. Response to initial invitation email ......................................................... 98
Table 5. Phase 2 sample split ............................................................................. 102
Table 6. Stratified random sampling ..................................................................... 103
Table 7. SEaM survey data - impact of studying on confidence ......................... 149
Table 8. SEaM survey – questions relating to tutor support and feedback ............ 163
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. The context of widening participation to HE

It is difficult to dispute the benefits that learning can bring to an individual, society and the economy (Faure, 1972; Delors, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; Million Plus, 2013). Learning in its broadest sense encompasses formal, informal and non-formal contexts (Rubenson, 2011; Schuller, 2017), reflecting the notion of life-wide learning (Tuckett, 2017). This concept encompasses learning that is a conscious act undertaken by an individual, which may or may not lead to a formal qualification, and learning that is subconscious, embedded within individuals through the ‘University of Life’ (Field, 2006, p.2). While not dismissing the value of learning across the broad spectrum of life, this thesis is primarily concerned with formal learning in higher education (HE) in a university setting. It has a specific focus on adult learners within the context of widening participation to HE, the environment within which my professional interests lie.

Widening participation to HE provides the context within which the benefits of learning identified above can be realised. Fifty-eight years ago, in one of the most significant changes to educational thinking in the UK, Lord Robbins reported in his findings of a review of the HE system in England:

Courses of higher education (HE) should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.

(Robbins, 1963, p. 8)

Robbins adopted a meritocratic position that argued for all who had the potential to succeed in HE to be deserving of a place. A similar position was presented by Chris Millward, Director of Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students (OFS), (the HE regulatory body in England), at a Fair Access and Participation Insight Event in May 2019.
Talent is everywhere but opportunity most certainly is not... the 2017 Act requires us [the OFS] to work towards equality of opportunity in relation to access and participation...we are aiming for equality of opportunity, not just improving access but fair access, but not just fair access to higher education but fair participation when you get there.

(Millward, 2019)

These quotations support the notion of lifelong learning as presented nationally and internationally within the context of the benefits of learning to the individual, society and the economy (Faure, 1972; Delors, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Lifelong learning, in its truest sense in formal educational settings, includes compulsory and post-compulsory environments across all age groups.

Approaches to widening participation to HE, typically differ between adult learners and school-aged children suggesting that the concept of lifelong learning as identified above is not necessarily delivered in practice. Widening participation to HE for school children aims to raise attainment (OFS, 2019b) and individual aspirations (Higher Education Academy, 2016). Outreach activity within the further education (FE) sector also differs despite there being a high proportion of adult learners. In 2020/21 The Association of Colleges reported 43% of students in FE are over 25 and 16% are between 19 and 24 (Association of Colleges, 2021). Initiatives such as the UniConnect programme funded by the OFS (2021), focus on partnership working between schools, colleges and universities to encourage greater participation in HE, suggesting that a shift has occurred that is more reflective of the concept of lifelong learning across these different educational contexts. These initiatives appear to have had the desired effect. The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) estimates the likelihood of a school-aged child participating in HE by age 30, based on current participation rates. In 2017/18 this was estimated at 50.2% (Department for Education, 2019b), with 18 year-old participation estimated to increase by 0.6% percentage points compared to a decline of 0.1 percentage points for 27 year olds. This suggests efforts to widen participation fail to reach older adults, particularly those who may have been out of formal education for some time and who are
dispersed across a range of environments such as the workplace, the community, unions, factories, churches or prisons.

Adult learners present many characteristics associated with widening participation. They are often first in family to attend university, have caring responsibilities and are disabled (Butcher, 2015b). While some of these characteristics may also be present in more traditional widening participation rhetoric there is an amplification of the barriers faced by adult learners brought about by other factors not as apparent in younger students. Adult learners tend to be more debt averse (Butcher, 2015b), they face competing priorities due to their multiple identities such as being a parent, employer or student (Askham, 2008), in addition to issues of confidence in relation to whether HE is for them (Norman and Hyland, 2003). Issues of confidence are often brought about as a result of poor previous experiences of education (Cross, 1981; Merrill, 2004). The combination of these factors contribute to decisions not to engage with HE (McGivney, 1990; Davies, Osborne and Williams, 2002; Osborne, Marks and Turner, 2004).

Approaches to outreach to HE for adult learners not already engaged in a formal learning environment, often focus on community-based initiatives and the development of informal short courses, introductory and preparatory courses that seek to develop confidence and study skills (OFFA, 2017). However, changes to funding regimes, to support the increasing rate of participation across the HE sector, present an additional barrier to participation in HE for adult learners. These barriers deny the opportunity for adult learners to experience the transformative power of learning (Mezirow, 1991; Shor, 1992), a concept particularly relevant to them as they battle with the impact of (often) negative experiences of previous education.

The introduction of student loans during the 2000s aimed to address some of the financial barriers to participation although eligibility criteria initially excluded adults who had already studied at HE level, and students who could only study part-time. Whilst loans did become available for part-time learners in 2012, the lifting of the fee cap in England in 2011/2012 had wide-reaching ramifications for how universities were funded. Universities were able to charge up to £9000 per year at that time, with a commitment to spend a proportion of this additional income on financially
supporting students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds to access HE.

This financial commitment is now agreed by the OFS within Access and Participation Plans (APPs). These plans are intensely scrutinised by the OFS and conditions can be imposed upon providers if the OFS feel that initiatives to enable equity of access and equitable outcomes are not implemented effectively. More seriously, HE providers can be refused registration if they fail to meet OFS requirements (OFS, 2019d). This impacts upon the ability of students to access financial support in the form of student loans and the availability of other funding opportunities, such as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) (OFS, 2019c). The true impact of this approach, particularly in relation to student success is however yet to be felt.

The OFS supports providers to meet their ambitions through guidance in terms of which student groups face the most challenges in accessing and participating in HE. Adult learners have only recently been included within Access and Participation Plan Guidance (OFS, 2019b), alongside students from low socio-economic backgrounds, disabled students, those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and care leavers. This is possibly due to the dramatic decline in part-time student numbers (predominantly adults), particularly since higher fees were introduced but also because of the pivotal role that adult learners play in meeting the economic demand for higher level skills in an increasingly competitive global market (Universities UK, 2015).

There is little recognition within OFS guidance or within wider widening participation literature of the transformative elements of learning, so pertinent to adult learners and which could influence the approaches that HE providers take to encourage participation. Although support for the wider transformational benefits of learning is evident within educational and lifelong learning political discourse (Faure, 1972; Delors, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019), in widening participation practice its invisibility is notable.

Recognition of these issues began to raise interesting questions for me in my professional role as a strategy developer at the Open University (OU). The OU:
1. Is the largest provider of part-time HE distance learning in the UK, with nearly 40% of the part-time market in 2015/16 (House of Lords, 2018).
2. Has a large proportion of the distance learning market (Garrett, 2017).
3. Has an average student age of 27 (The Open University, 2021b).

1.2. The OU as a widening participation institution

The OU is an institution with an explicit social justice mission; its open entry policy means that students are able to study for an undergraduate qualification without any of the entry requirements needed for study at traditional face to face universities. It is one of the largest universities in Europe with 175,718 students (The Open University, 2019c). Many students register with low previous educational qualifications (LPEQs) (less than 2 A levels). In 2018/19 31.5% of OU entrants had less than 2 A levels (see Figure 4, p.798). Such a demographic requires a particular pedagogical approach to ensure all students are effectively supported into and through their undergraduate studies. Most OU students also study part-time, alongside full or part-time employment (72% in 2021 (The Open University, 2021b) which distinguishes them from most students within the rest of the HE sector. Many may have caring responsibilities for dependent children and also for long-term sick, disabled or elderly people (Butcher, 2015b). Students have studied at the OU from as young as 14 and as old as 99. Widening participation to HE is therefore central to the OU’s mission. Appendix 1 provides further details of the University and the demographic breakdown of its student body.

The OU has developed its original distance learning approach using print-based materials, audio/video resources and face to face tutorials since its inception in 1969, to increasing use of technologies and interactive media platforms to enable the flexibility of remote access for many of its students. This has evolved into a blended approach to teaching and learning at a distance, using a mix of print, online and face to face delivery models. Whilst the first year of undergraduate study is designed to support students into the HE environment through embedding study skills within its pedagogical model, the OU’s dedicated widening participation programme (Access) offers a more personalised, one to one study experience, with a dedicated tutor proactively phoning on a monthly basis. These telephone tutorials are primarily aimed at overcoming issues of confidence and self-belief, so pertinent to many adult
learners. While the distance learning model, enables HE to be more accessible for some adult learners (Keegan, 1998), it does present challenges in terms overcoming some of the barriers that adult learners face in terms of their multiple identities and characteristics highlighted in Section 1.1 (p.12) above.

1.3. **Rationale for the study**

As a senior manager at the OU within what was then the Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships (CICP), I was responsible for developing the University’s Widening Access and Success Strategy for 2015-2018, which responded to government and institutional priorities for supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds into HE. Strategy development focused on identifying specific actions across all stages of the student lifecycle that the institution could implement to improve access and success for underrepresented and disadvantaged students. This was predominantly focused on the students from low socio-economic backgrounds, disabled students and those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, but also additional student groups that related specifically to the OU context (i.e. carers\(^1\) and students in secure environments (SiSE).

In developing the Widening Access and Success Strategy to respond to Access Agreement (predecessor to Access and Participation Plans) requirements, some specific challenges emerged. The first challenge relates to the transformative power of learning which is particularly pertinent to adult learners studying at the OU, evidenced by qualitative data collected by the institution in relation to the student experience. The transformative power of learning however does not align with the measures of success which are used across the HE sector, in terms of continuation, qualification and graduate outcomes. The second challenge was the identification of adult learners as a discrete group within Access Agreement guidance. It raised the question as to whether widening participation policy, being predominantly focused at the macro level, essentially assumes that adult learners are all the same. There is potential for this macro level assumption to be reflected in the approaches that are

---

\(^1\) A carer is anyone who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support (Carers Trust, 2019)
adopted to support adult learners as they return to a formal learning environment. My thesis is based upon these challenges.

**Challenge 1: Success in a transformative model**

One of the aims of widening access to HE has been to meet the economic demand for skills in an increasingly competitive global market (Universities UK, 2015). Therefore, success of widening participation initiatives is often measured in terms of metrics such as completion rates, grades, employment rates and income levels. However, these measures are problematic in the context of adult learning which in this thesis is firmly embedded in the perspective that all learning is transformative.

As already mentioned, research is based within the context of the formal HE learning environment. Whilst it recognises that HE also takes place within the further education (FE) sector, the research is specifically focused on adult learners returning to formal learning within a university context.

In the formal HE context, subjects that have been deemed as ‘low value’ (Department for Education, 2019a), such as the arts and humanities, remain attractive to many adult learners, many of whom will be in employment and not necessarily looking for career change or promotion. These courses are perceived by some as not directly contributing to meeting skills gaps or increasing productivity and global competitiveness. Funding for higher value subjects such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) are prioritised within government policy, and criteria that excludes financial support for courses that are equivalent to or lower than an individual’s existing HE qualification imposed.

There is clearly an argument that suggests lifelong learning in its broadest sense ‘from cradle to grave’ (Field, 2006) is transformative across all age boundaries. Transformative in the context of this thesis is twofold: a process of learning which supports the development of new knowledge or reinforcement of existing assumptions (Mezirow, 2018) or personal development as a result of the learning process which transforms an individual in terms of their wider engagement in society, professional and personal environments (Department for Education and Employment, 1998; The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019).
The distinction between the two notions of transformative learning is important to this thesis. The process element of transformative learning relates specifically to the research question, presented in Section 1.4 below, around approaches to widening participation to HE for adult learners which focus on supportive pedagogical models. The wider definition of transformative learning which encourages benefits to society, the professional context and the individual relates to the exploration of past educational experiences of adult learners and how their re-engagement within the HE environment may help to overcome issues of confidence that these experiences have created. By focusing on these two elements of transformative learning within this thesis, both the process of learning and the impact of learning on an individual are relevant to answering the research questions.

Specifically in relation to adult learners, adult education theories suggest alternative approaches to learning are required for adults as they return to learning. Challenging embedded assumptions and existing perceptions, based on lived experiences (Mezirow, 1991) are likely to factor less within younger learners. Accordingly, learning through different stages of the life-course takes on different approaches to meet the different needs of learners as they mature into adulthood (Schuller and Watson, 2009; Illeris, 2017;). Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (1991) offers the conditions within which adult learners returning to formal learning can transform their thinking, either to create new learning or to reinforce existing assumptions. Whatever the outcome, the process of learning is what makes it transformative.

Transformative learning theory develops the concept of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994) which is not restricted to adult learners. Freire’s work is very much related to mobilising individuals into action against a dominant structure, empowering those individuals to reflect on and challenge their ‘socially constructed’ position in society. His approach relates to transformative change at a societal level, achieved through the critical pedagogy. The approaches that Freire advocates aim to bring into the consciousness of those suppressed by the dominant forces with the aim of mobilising them into action to challenge. Critical pedagogy aims to achieve this through advocating active participation by all individuals, in shaping the direction of their learning.
The boundaries of my professional doctorate precluded any radical overhaul of societal structures. Freire’s approach to critical pedagogy is relevant in terms of widening participation as it suggests a shared sense of positionality with the classroom and the development of an awareness of the individual within that and other contexts, which helps individuals to reflect on their own knowledges and assumptions. This is achieved by developing a shared identity in the classroom whereby differences and inequalities are levelled out. Critical thinking, facilitated by the tutor/lecturer, enables individuals to challenge societal ideologies that dominate all aspects of society and their position within them. From an adult learner perspective, the facilitation of critical thinking is key to enabling transformative learning. Whilst critical thinking is embedded within traditional pedagogical models in both compulsory and post-compulsory education, the approach is particularly relevant for adult learners as it encourages them to challenge those deeply embedded assumptions, developed over many years. It is this process within which transformative learning occurs within adults, which makes it distinct from learning that takes place with younger students. Approaches to widening participation for adult learners therefore should reflect this distinctiveness.

**Challenge 2: Adult learners in the widening participation landscape**

There has been a plethora of research over the last 20 years exploring widening participation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning journal and the Journal of Access Studies). In the context of widening participation, the research tends to focus upon 18-year-old school leavers, while adult learners have typically been positioned within the context of lifelong learning, continuing education or post-compulsory education. Part-time HE is primarily undertaken by adult and mature learners (Callender, 2015) and as previously identified, adult learners present many characteristics associated with widening participation (Butcher, 2015b). It is important to note early on in this thesis that the term adult and mature learner are often used interchangeably. Crossan et al., (2003), Merrill (2004), and Butcher and Fowle (2018) refer to the term adult learner whereas Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths (2011), Goodchild (2017) and the OFS (2020b) refer to the term mature learner.
The European Commission (2010, p.6) defines adult learning as ‘the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities which are undertaken by adults, after a break since leaving initial education and training and which results in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills’. This definition neglects to place an actual age on its definition of an adult learner, which may vary between countries. The OFS’ Adults in HE (AHE) measure for instance defines an adult as ‘all residents over the age of 16’ (OFS, 2020b). Adult learners may also be identified on the basis of adult experience and the adoption of behaviours that suggest ‘adulthood’ (Merriam and Brockett (1997). The different interpretations of what constitutes an adult is important, as age is likely to contribute to arguments that suggest adult learners are not an homogeneous group (Waller, 2006), acknowledging that approaches to widening participation for a 21-year-old adult may be significantly different from those for a 41-year-old. For the purposes of the research presented in this thesis, the term adult learner will be used throughout, using a definition of over 21. The term mature learner will be used where literature explicitly makes reference to it.

Approaches to outreach for adult learners of any age generally differ from those aimed at school-leavers from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds who are assumed to lack aspiration to enter HE. Traditional universities undertake outreach within schools, aimed at raising aspirations and developing a sense of ‘HE is for me’ (Higher Education Academy, 2016). More recent initiatives such as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) (OFS, 2019b) aim to raise attainment at GCSE level targeting areas where there is low progression to HE.

Approaches to widening participation for adult learners returning to formal learning typically reflect the assumption that adult learners lack confidence in their academic ability and study skills (Busher et al., 2014; Chapman, 2017; OFFA, 2017; Butcher, et al. (2019). The OFFA (2017) study presented several approaches to outreach for disadvantaged adult learners based on these assumptions:

- community-based outreach
- foundation programmes
- HE introductory studies
• access programmes

• informal learning resources

The approaches aim to support adult learners as they return to learning, particularly those who have been out of formal education for some time. Mansell and Parkin (in McGivney, 1996) suggests that tutor approaches to student support be personalised, reflecting the individuality of adult learners. McGivney (1996) argues for approaches that are embedded within the culture of the institution, benefitting all students not just adult learners. This would address arguments relating to deficit thinking (Harry and Clingner, 2007; Valencia, 2012; Smit, 2012), which can be a criticism of widening participation programmes.

In addition, the OFS has placed a greater emphasis on student success in response to data that suggests students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to achieve equitable outcomes than other students. Targeted interventions such as buddying schemes and mentoring programmes aim to remedy this (Thomas, 2012; AdvanceHE, 2020). In the case of adult learners, developing such schemes within traditional contexts, where the students may not be on campus at the same time or when other priorities outside of the HE environment prevent engagement at specified times, becomes a challenge (TASO, 2021). Approaches, therefore, focus on the particular context within which the HE provider operates.

Despite the specific needs of adult learners noted above, it is acknowledged that adult learners return to learning having had poor experiences of education in the past (Cross, 1981; Merrill, 2004; Askham, 2008). While much is known about the specific experiences there appears to be a lack of in-depth understanding of how they impact adult learners, beyond a recognition of the need to build confidence. There is potential for misalignment with the needs of adult learners if absorbed, without deeper insight, into widening participation policy and practice. This has influenced the direction of the research within this EdD which aims to fill this under-researched gap, bringing adult learning and widening participation together within the overarching context of social justice. Unpicking the diverse experiences of this student cohort as they re-engage in learning will contribute new knowledge within
the two domains of widening participation and adult learning and the overarching context of social justice.

The research focuses a literature review on adult learners and adult education in the context of lifelong learning and its transformative power over and above the more traditional aims of widening participation relating to social mobility and the need to meet economic demands. It enables a greater understanding of the effectiveness of widening participation programmes and provides recommendations as to how they may better support adult learner needs.

1.4. The broad research question

The study reported in this thesis explores widening participation from a social justice perspective and specifically in relation to the transformative benefits that learning can bring. At the heart of this is the view that equality of opportunity to HE is the right of every individual who has the ability and desire to partake (Robbins, 1963). This aspiration, however, is challenged by the persistent barriers to HE faced by students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds. Policy changes in response to increased participation have the potential to negatively impact the students to whom widening participation policy is aimed. Whilst Access and Participation Plans aim to ensure HE providers provide support for these students, the impact of these changes on adult learners is perhaps less well understood within a widening participation context and potentially excludes the adult learners within which this thesis is focused.

Therefore, the research question that forms the starting point for the study reported in this thesis is:

To what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to a formal learning environment?

This question will be further developed through a review of literature in Chapter 2 relating to widening participation to HE, adult learning, adult learners and lifelong learning. More detailed sub-questions will also be presented in Chapter 2.
In addressing this question, the research takes a social constructivist approach. Social constructivism assumes that individuals make new knowledge by the interactions that they have with others in the world, as opposed to positivists who assume that there is one way of knowing the world (The Open University, 2014). Social constructivist approaches to teaching, therefore, focus on methods that encourage dialogue, discussion and debate rather than merely transmission of information from one person to another (Freire, 1972). It is within this context that transformative learning occurs through a process of interaction and reflection whereby existing assumptions are challenged which either reinforce existing or create new knowledge (Mezirow, 1991; Jarvis, 2003).

The social constructivist position adopted within this thesis informs the research design which takes the form of a case study. Within this design, qualitative research is undertaken through one-to-one telephone interviews with adult learners, selected to represent the characteristics of adult learners returning to formal learning with low previous educational qualifications. The research recognises the individuality of participants (Somekh and Lewin, 2005), and uses their experiences to explore the extent to which approaches to widening participation are effective for adult learners returning to a formal learning environment.

1.5. **The position of the researcher**

My professional role within the case study institution is embedded within the context of widening participation to HE. It straddles strategic and operational domains, firmly situated within a social justice model of HE and the belief that access to HE is a right for anyone who has the desire to study, whatever their background. It is within this context that research was undertaken.

As someone who operationalises the policy framework laid out by the regulatory body for HE, the OFS, it is imperative that my position as a researcher and practitioner within the case study institution is explicitly recognised at the very beginning of this thesis. This is relevant not only to the research methodology but also in terms of the claims that can be made from the findings of the research. In relation to the former there is potential for subjectivity to influence any data collection methods and subsequent analysis (Payne and Payne, 2004). A study design feature to mitigate this
was the vignette approach which explicitly sought to place the power of the relationship between researcher and participant (Barter and Renold, 1999) with the participant. This meant that the concept of ‘bracketing’ of the researcher from the research context (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000) was not needed. The use of vignettes will be explored in detail in Section 3.10.

Whilst having an awareness of this is required in order that participants are not influenced in terms of their contribution to the research, it is impossible for the research to be presented as impartial. The thesis is influenced by my insider knowledge and the challenges that I have identified through my professional role at the case study institution and the wider policy landscape. The strength of the research in this respect is that it enables me to address these issues in order to make recommendations both to practice and policy.

It is important to recognise this positionality and how it enables me to make the claims and recommendations within Chapter 7, and specifically Section 7.7. My research sought to explore the extent to which adult learners’ needs are effectively met through approaches to widening participation to HE. The findings provide additional insight to adult learner experiences at the case study institution and also to other HE providers, who seek to support adult learners. Whilst my position as an insider-researcher may be criticised for its lack of objectivity (Hellawell, 2006; Brannick and Coglan, 2007) it brings strength to my research as it enables new knowledge and understanding to be developed and provides recommendations for action as a result of the ‘immersive’ nature of my role within the University. Both insider and outsider researchers face issues of identity within the research process, overcoming power dynamics between researcher and participant, the desire to eliminate bias and the need for transparency in relation to the researcher’s position within the research design (Fleming, 2018). The dual role that I hold as researcher and practitioner however enables the opportunity to significantly impact the student experience and institutional decision-making. Such a position would be challenging for an outsider-researcher. Mercer (2007) and Trowler (2011) suggest that insider-research works along a continuum, with the researcher at different points within the research journey engaging with parts of the environment within which the research is based, that are more or less familiar to them. In this regard the strength of insider
research is that it enables researchers to develop research questions that are more nuanced, building on existing internal knowledge, a position that an outsider researcher would struggle to reach. My research supports this notion of insider research as a dynamic continuum with the researcher moving along the spectrum of familiar and unfamiliar environments at different points of the research process (Hellawell, 2006). My interviews with students, tutors, educational advisors and a policymaker demonstrate familiarity with these environments to differing degrees. This position enables me to make recommendations within practice in my own and other institutions, as a direct result of my research. However in relation to policy, I am able to make recommendations because of my position as someone who straddles both policy and practice, with an understanding of the policy frameworks that practice is based upon and the challenges this presents.

2. Significance of the study

The study is significant in that it challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about widening participation to HE for adult learners in relation to the transformative power of learning. It has particular relevance for the case study institution in the support that it provides for its students (predominantly adult learners), reflecting their heterogeneity based on previous educational experience and the impact this has on them as they return to study. While the case study institution is unique in terms of its student body, scale and reach, the study has significance across the HE sector. From a policy perspective it questions the discourse around widening participation and lifelong learning, in what appear to be presented as mutually exclusive concepts. Within HE provision it challenges the assumptions in terms of the needs of adult learners, which often focus on their present characteristics in terms of professional and personal commitments, with only superficial reference to the impact of past experiences of education. It is also significant in that it increases the visibility of the adult learner student voice within widening participation policy. While much research into widening participation draws upon the experiences of students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds in HE, there is little research that focuses upon the student voice in relation to developing policy and within strategic contexts, and specifically adult learners return to learning having had poor previous experiences of education. My research is timely because Access and
Participation Plans in England are increasingly requiring more student involvement in their development. The findings of the research will inform the work of practitioners at the case study institution and in the HE sector more generally, including policymakers. They will contribute positive ways forward in the context of arguments that suggest adult learners and adult education more generally have been neglected within HE and widening participation policy (Scott, 2015; McInerney, 2019), particularly in relation to the transformative benefits of learning, so pertinent to this cohort.

2.1. Structure of the thesis

To address the research question presented above, Chapter 2 explores literature around the areas identified in this introduction:

- Adult learners returning to learning
- The historical policy context of adult learning and widening participation
- Lifelong learning
- Widening participation to HE for adult learners
- Transformative learning

The literature review reveals gaps and assumptions in our understanding which then form the basis for the more detailed research questions which are presented at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 3 provides a rationale for the research design, particularly the qualitative approach to addressing the research questions based on the need to explore the in-depth and personal experiences of adult learners returning to a formal learning environment. A rationale is provided for the case study approach (Stake, 2005; Yin, 1981; Tellis, 1997a; Merriam, 1998), using the case of adult learners who have been out of formal education for some time studying at the OU. Using this case also provides boundaries of the research, given the potentially overwhelming scope of widening participation activity across the HE sector. The chapter provides details of the research methods that specifically respond to the research questions. This will include an approach which sought to overcome some of the ethical challenges that arose during phase 1 of the study which related to the sensitive nature of the research and my position as an insider researcher.
Chapter 4 focuses upon the approach to the collection and analysis of the interview data. This specifically relates to the sampling methods used in phases 1 and 2 of the research and the approach adopted to develop themes. The chapter demonstrates how the two phases of the research were used to inform the approach to data collection and analysis including the tools used to enable the themes to emerge.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the research drawing from the previous educational experiences of participants whilst at school, during post-compulsory education and now, as they return to formal learning. The chapter uses extracts and quotations from the interview data to support the argument being made. A discussion of the findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 is undertaken in Chapter 6 and specifically in relation to the research question posed above and the sub-questions in Chapter 2. It presents participant experiences within the context of adult and lifelong learning and specifically the transformative benefits that learning can bring, particularly as adults return to learning having had poor previous educational experiences.

Chapter 7 summarises the discussion and presents concluding remarks that reflect the research in its entirety. A concept map provides a diagrammatic representation of the research from which the conclusions and recommendations have been drawn. The chapter provides recommendations to the case study institution, which also have implications for the wider HE sector and policymakers. It identifies the implications for my own professional practice and the limitations of the research before suggesting directions for future research.
Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

As presented in Chapter 1, this research focuses on adult learners who missed the opportunity to enter HE direct from compulsory education and who have returned to a formal learning environment. It is positioned within the context of widening participation to HE, as adult learners are identified as a priority within Access and Participation Plan (APP) Guidance (OFS, 2019a). The research explores the assumptions upon which approaches to widening participation to HE for adult learners returning to formal learning are based. Specifically, the research asks:

To what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners?

In order to investigate this, two sub-questions have been identified:

1. How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?

2. How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?

Whilst it is difficult to separate the literature into discrete components, within the broad policy context of widening participation to HE for adult learners, this research has been informed by a literature search on the following general (although not exclusive) key themes and authors:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong learning</td>
<td>Schuller and Watson (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schuller (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field (2000, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biesta (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widening participation to HE for</td>
<td>Gorard and Smith (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adult learners</td>
<td>Butcher (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learners</td>
<td>Cross (1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rubenson (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aldridge and Tuckett (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pascall and Cox (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time learners</td>
<td>Butcher (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hillman et al. (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Callender (2015, 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goodchild (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult education</td>
<td>Kelly (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jarvis (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fieldhouse (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learning</td>
<td>Mezirow (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowles (1980)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hillage et al. (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rubenson (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to learning</td>
<td>Freire (1972)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hooks (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jarvis (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illeris (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shor (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tomlinson (1996)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1 presents the overarching literature review framework which includes elements of the wider policy context, not specifically identified above.

![Literature Review Framework](image)

**Figure 1 Literature review framework.**

The chapter will begin by exploring the current and historical policy context of adult learning and widening participation, particularly in relation to the concept of lifelong learning and how changes to fees and funding have impacted on adult learners returning to formal learning. The motivations, challenges and influences on adults who return to formal learning, particularly those older adults who have been out of formal education for a significant period, are subsequently explored. While the literature reviewed acknowledges the wider context of learning for adults within informal and non-formal environments, it is focused on formal learning within an HE environment. The chapter explores literature on approaches to supporting adult learners into HE and the transformative benefits that HE in the liberal education tradition brings to the individual.

Liberal education enables ‘individuals to use their knowledge for the purpose of administering the common good, not for personal gain to move outside of the boundaries of the social grouping within which one finds oneself’ (Alfred, 2001, p. 21). In the liberal education model, subjects often considered of ‘low’ value
economically (Department for Education, 2019a), have more currency from a transformative perspective. Within this context, the chapter explores the challenges in measuring the success of adult learners beyond measures of attainment and graduate outcomes. Approaches to learning for adults are subsequently discussed, building on the alternative learning needs of individuals as they mature, referring to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) and learning theories presented by Illeris (2017) and Jarvis (2018).

2.2. Adult learners returning to learning

Learning in its broadest sense encompasses formal, non-formal and informal contexts (Schuller, 2017), to which individuals can be exposed either consciously or subconsciously (Field, 2006). Rogers (2014) and Rubenson (2011) present the definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning based on a summary by UNESCO in 2009.

- **Formal learning** is intentional learning, with structured objectives, timetabling and support which leads to certification. It is formally delivered through an education provider.

- **Non-formal learning** is also intentional and structured in much the same way as formal learning. However, it is not always delivered through an educational institution and does not lead to certification.

- Finally, **informal learning** is not structured, and results from engagement in many day-to-day activities within work, family or social activities. Although there is a rise in certification based on experiential learning, generally informal learning does not lead to certification and may even be unintentional.

The distinction between these three learning environments is important to this thesis as the pedagogical approaches within each differ and in some cases, particularly informal learning, are not likely to be explicit. Given the educational environment within which the research is based it is appropriate for the formal HE learning environment to form the boundary of the research and associated literature reviewed.
This thesis is framed within the context of widening participation to HE for adult learners specifically HE in a university rather than FE environment. It focuses on the transformative benefits of learning that the HE experience can provide across the spectrum of vocational and non-vocational courses, the latter more likely to be the domain of a university setting (Kennedy, 1997). It is important to recognise participation in adult learning more generally, in order to position adult learners in HE within the wider context of adult education, given that many adults study outside of HE. This recognition informs the thesis in terms of how adult learners are perceived within widening participation policy which has, up until recently focused on outreach and support for younger students.

2.3. The historical policy context of adult learning and widening participation

The research is set within the context of policy decisions to expand and subsequently diversify HE in England, initiated by the Robbins Review (1963) and enhanced by subsequent reviews, notably that of Dearing (1997), and thereafter the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2010). The publication of the Robbins’ report came at a time of increasing university participation following the post-war boom of predominantly younger students (Kelly, 1970). Robbins’ argument was that all who had the desire and potential to succeed in HE were deserving of a place.

The establishment of plate glass universities in late 50s and early 60s could be credited as the beginning of widening participation policy, prior to, but subsequently enhanced by Robbins. Subsequent initiatives such as the establishment of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in 1963, the introduction of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) and establishment of polytechnics in the 1980s all contributed to HE becoming more accessible for adult learners. The CNAA enabled institutions other than universities the ability to grant degrees; CATS provided a framework for providing modular based credit accumulation, which had, aside from the Open University, been offered mainly by polytechnics. Polytechnics did not have degree-awarding powers until the Further and Higher Education Act in 1993 whereby 33 polytechnics were granted university status.
While these initiatives afforded adult learners more opportunity to engage in HE, the extension of university education was already happening from the beginning of the 20th century. Initiatives such as the establishment of the Workers Education Association (WEA) in 1903, university extension and residential schools and extra mural activities during the first few decades of the 1900s, all aimed to provide adult learners with opportunities to engage in a more formal educational environment (Kelly, 1970; Fieldhouse, 1996). Despite the initiatives outlined above, the 1940-50 post-war recovery effort was damaging to adult education as funds devoted to school and technical education restricted the opportunities available. Increasingly, adult learners were required to fund their own learning (Kelly, 1970).

De-prioritising the funding of adult education in favour of younger learners contradicts the rhetoric that is played out within policies that advocate for lifelong (and life-wide) learning and the wider emancipatory and transformative benefits of learning (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919; Faure, 1972; Delors, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019; Russell, 1973). The Kennedy (1997), Fryer (1997) and Dearing (1997) reports which contributed to the publication of The Learning Age (Department for Education and Employment, 1998) claim equal value in meeting economic and societal needs between adult education and more traditional university education, across the domains of formal and post-compulsory education. These reports have been criticised for the exclusion of any reference to compulsory education as part of the lifelong learning agenda with a focus only on formal education and training (Tight, 1998). They do however, clearly argue for learning ‘for its own sake’ as well as to meet the economic demands of a global economy (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). The findings of these reports in terms of the emancipatory and individual benefits of adult education are mirrored in the recommendations made within the Centenary Commission Report on Adult Education (2019) and the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education 4 (GRALE4) (Stanistreet, 2019).
2.4. What is meant by lifelong learning?

‘Lifelong learning is a personal process. It is something that people do. Conversely, lifelong education is an institutional fact (Searle, 1995), arising from and enacted by the social world, usually in the form of the provision of particular kinds of experiences’ (Billet, 2017).

The concept of lifelong learning to which educational policies over the past 50 years across the UK, Europe and globally have alluded reflects the economic, personal and societal benefits that learning in its broadest sense can bring (Faure, 1972; Delors, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Policy decisions to reduce funding particularly for adult education but also for ‘low value degrees’ and non-vocational courses suggest a shift to a narrow focus on education within formal environments rather than learning which is seen to encompass aspects of life-wide learning (Tight, 1998; Field, 2006). This will be discussed later in Section 2.4.1.

Successful learning impacts on individual confidence across all age boundaries (Biesta, 2008). The focus on skills and vocational courses however suggests that the wider emancipatory benefits of learning are less of a priority for government policy than the economic benefits learning brings. Tan (2017) refers to the triadic notion of lifelong learning which ‘integrates the aims of economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, as well as social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity’. This perspective is also articulated as ‘mastery’, ‘meritocracy’ and ‘you’ (Ong, 2016) whereby:

- ‘mastery’ refers to expertise and the confidence to innovate
- ‘meritocracy’ refers to a whole diversity of achievements that are recognised and celebrated
- ‘you’ refers to an exhortation to individuals to follow their interests and engage in further personal/professional growth and self-discovery.

These concepts potentially align with the stages of education within which traditional widening participation policies are embedded. Well-funded widening participation policies focus on raising attainment during compulsory education (National Outreach
Collaborative Programme, (OFS), 2019) and the development of aspirations and opportunities for individuals who are less likely to participate in HE but are high achievers (Higher Education Academy, 2016). The wider benefits to the individual are seemingly seen as a by-product of the more quantifiable aspects of education. Similarly, within the adult learning environment, the focus on mastery to engage adults in further learning, is more clearly aligned with the need to meet skills gaps rather than the need to develop as individuals, a position disputed by Russell.

‘[T]he value of education is not solely to be measured by increases in earning power or productive capacity or by any other materialistic yardstick, but by the quality of life it inspires in the individual and generates for the community at large.’

(Russell Report 1973, p. 4.)

From this perspective, HE is more than just a desire to improve social mobility as is often cited within widening participation policy. Russell’s quotation highlights the tension between HE as a right for all (Schuller and Watson, 2009) and the means by which economic needs can be met through individuals progressing up the social ladder (Loveday, 2015). The focus on the latter has meant that widening participation has potentially reduced the opportunities available to adult learners who may be studying for transformational benefits which are less apparent for younger students.

Adopting the true sense of lifelong learning which recognises its values across all the domains identified above, acknowledges that the boundaries of lifelong learning are unlimited, going beyond formal settings such as schools, colleges and universities (Schuller and Watson, 2009). Lifelong learning encompasses formal, non-formal and informal contexts throughout the life course (Schuller, 2017), and hence individuals can be exposed to learning either consciously or subconsciously (Field, 2006). This view of lifelong learning contrasts with the view in the UNESCO Report (Faure, 1972) which focuses on lifelong learning within a formal, post-compulsory educational context. However, neither the UNESCO report or the article by Schuller and Watson, refer to lifelong learning within the compulsory schooling system specifically, which leaves something of a gap if lifelong learning encompasses learning from cradle to grave (Field, 2006).
Tight (1998) points out the failure to align the concept of lifelong learning to compulsory education within all three of the major UK reports that contributed to The Learning Age (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). His criticism supports the argument that suggests there is no binary divide between compulsory, school-based education and post-compulsory education (Fieldhouse, 1996; Million Plus and NUS, 2012). In recognition of the fluidity of learning from compulsory education through to continuing education, James (2020) suggests there is a need to challenge existing institutional structures around the concepts of lifelong learning. According to this perspective, teaching children to become lifelong learners through instilling a desire to learn should be a key priority for formal educational settings, instead of a narrow focus on achieving qualifications. This would overcome some of the perceived negative connotations of adult learning being ‘second-chance’ learning, as the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education would be viewed as a natural progression at different stages of the life-course. This would be a shift away from a deficit model which places adult learners within an ‘othered’ space right from the start (Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001; Mallman and Lee, 2016). It assumes that the problem which requires fixing lies within the individual, rather than recognising wider institutional and structural barriers that prevent individuals from engaging in the HE environment (Valencia, 2012). Moving away from deficit thinking is welcome as much of the discourse around adult learning is presented as ‘second chance’ and catering for those who ‘missed out the first time round’ (Pullen, 1994; Busher et al., 2015).

Concepts such as ‘lack of confidence’ and ‘lacking study skills’ could be replaced with language more reflective of a capabilities approach which enable individuals to be and/or do what they value (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2011).

‘[I]ndividuals of all ages engage in different forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) throughout their lives which enable the acquisition of new knowledge, new ways of dealing with situations and new ways of coping with life.’

(Matheson and Matheson, 1996, p.220)
This perspective supports the concept of life-wide learning and the broad definition of lifelong learning that truly spans a whole lifetime. Amidst the criticisms of the vague and all-encompassing nature of lifelong learning (Field, 2006; Gelpi, 1979) and the fact that lifelong learning means many things to many people (Coffield, 2000), there is a need for a clearer definition of the term and the practices that are delivered in its name. As it currently stands, there is no evidence that, from a policy perspective, the importance of lifelong learning and its transformative benefits is supported in practice.

2.4.1. Education or learning?

A review of the distinction between the terms ‘learning’ and ‘education’ could potentially provide a better understanding of the broad concept of lifelong learning. This is worthy of discussion, as the term lifelong learning also alludes to the transformative benefits of ‘learning’ as opposed to the economic benefits of ‘education’. The distinction between ‘learning’ and ‘education’ maps across to subjects that are considered ‘low-value’ in that, whilst they may bring about learning, they potentially have less of a direct economic impact, than more vocational and skills-based subjects, which more clearly do (Department for Education, 2019a). The level of subject studied is also of relevance as intermediary level courses, often delivered in FE, are differentiated from more advanced professional vocational courses such as nursing or teaching, delivered within an HE environment (Kennedy, 1997). The distinction between the transformative and economic benefits of learning is also replicated within the broad literature on lifelong learning, whereby lifelong learning relates to the former and lifelong education responds to the latter, (Lawson, 1982; Matheson and Matheson, 1996). Lifelong learning is considered to be a personal process, something that people do as opposed to lifelong education which is delivered and received through institutions (Billet, 2017, p. 2).

There is some relationship here with the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning, presented in Section 2.2 which suggests that the former two are environments where education ‘happens’ and learning does not. This is perhaps over-simplistic, neglecting to demonstrate the transformative powers of learning whether they are in formal, non-formal or informal settings. The concept of
transformative learning is particularly relevant to adult learners and will be discussed in more detail in Section 2.6.

The distinction between education and learning and formal, non-formal and informal learning is potentially addressed through the use of the term lifelong learning which encompasses all learning environments. The dichotomy between lifelong learning and lifelong education as being within or without formal settings is therefore potentially misleading (Matheson and Matheson, 1996). This is perhaps why the former has become more popular in its use in recognition of the fact that learning is life-wide as well as lifelong (Billet, 2017). Valuing the concept of lifelong learning in its broadest sense should enable both economic and transformative benefits to be realised. However, in practice, while the term is used broadly suggesting that lifelong learning encompasses both education and learning, policy decisions are predominantly based on the narrower definition associated with lifelong education.

This perspective aligns with Illeris’s (2017) arguments that the responsibility for learning is transferred from the State to the individual as individuals get older. Schuller and Watson (2009) allude to the disproportionate bias of investment in education and learning towards earlier stages of the life-course. This is evidenced through the transition from compulsory State-funded education up to the age of 18 to post-compulsory education which is funded through tuition fees. While student loans are theoretically available to every adult, enabling HE to be accessible to all, older adults are more likely to face restrictions in terms of eligibility criteria, which may prevent them from accessing HE. This argument is discussed in more detail below.

2.4.2. The impact of the focus on lifelong ‘education’ by policymakers

The UK and other countries across Europe are witnessing a reduction in funding for adult education, restricted curriculum choices focusing on skills and employability, and a reduction in adult participation (Stanistreet, 2019; Learning and Work Institute, 2019). The 2019 Adult Learner Participation Survey (Learning and Work Institute, 2019) reported that only 35% of adults had engaged in any form of learning in the previous three years, the lowest reported since the survey began in 1996. The definition of learning within the survey, includes any form of learning, including
formal, non-formal and informal and therefore is perhaps misleading in terms of its relationship to the adult education funding context. The 2020 Adult Learner Participation Survey (Aldridge, Jones and Southgate, 2020) however, revealed an increase in adult participation in learning by eight percentage points. The increase in general participation in learning by adults is likely to have been impacted by the current Covid-19 pandemic across the globe, amplifying the need for adult learners to rethink their learning trajectories to respond to the economic needs of a post-Covid world (Aldridge, 2004). The ability to respond to economic and societal changes is not, however, reflected in this reactive approach to learning. This is concerning for those learners who dip in and out of learning as and when the need arises to meet specific, often short-term objectives (Biesta, 2008). The wider transformative benefits of lifelong learning which help to develop resilience and adaptability become invisible (Cross 1981; Tan, 2017). This is even more pronounced for those adults who do not engage in any form of organised learning (Biesta, 2008), for example adults from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds, older adults, those who are unemployed and those with fewer years of initial education (Aldridge, Jones and Southgate, 2020). This not only shows a gap in how lifelong learning is articulated throughout the life-course, but also contributes to the learning divide (Sargant et al., 1997) which works counter productively to the objectives of widening participation.

It could be argued that there will always be those who participate in learning to different extents and those who do not. Gorard (2006) refers to individuals who have a lifelong pattern of learning against those who have a pattern of non-participation. He argues that the reproduction of learning trajectories is strongest amongst lifetime learners and weakest amongst delayed or transitional learners. Nonetheless, a reduction in opportunities to participate and increased barriers will do little to encourage adult learners to participate, potentially making it more difficult for even those individuals who do have an appetite for learning and almost impossible for those who are resistant. While Cross (1981) argues that participation in lifelong learning is a necessity to enable individuals to respond to economic and societal changes, the likelihood of realising this is dependent on opportunities being made available, rather than restricted.
Sector data reporting the positive story that the number of full-time students in HE from widening participation backgrounds has increased, masks a dramatic decline in part-time HE participation (HESA, 2019a). The annual OFS Review of Access and Participation in England reports that the ratio between part-time and full-time students has shifted from 60:40 to 40:60 over the last few years (OFS, 2020). Participation rates of part-time students are particularly relevant to discussions around adult learning as the majority of part-time learners are adults (Million Plus and NUS, 2012): in 2019/20, 68% of part-time students were over 25. Part-time students are also more likely to be women (Spellman, 2015) and more likely than traditional university-age participants to present characteristics associated with widening participation (Butcher, 2015b; OFS, 2020c; McGivney, 1990) including:

- being the first in the family to go to university
- having caring responsibilities
- having a disability
- having existing financial commitments.

The dramatic decline in part-time HE student numbers (Callender, 2018; Callender and Thompson, 2018; Horrocks, 2015; Spellman, 2015) reinforces the evidence that the optimistic political discourse around adult education is not played out in practice, and funding cuts beyond HE serve only to reinforce the de-prioritisation of adult learners across the board (Parker, 2021). The inclusion of adult learners within Access and Participation Plan Guidance (OFS, 2019b), may be a positive step toward redressing the imbalance.

The Adult Participation in Learning Survey (2019) reported that adult participation in learning was at its lowest since the survey began in 1996, dropping 10 percentage points since 2010 from 43% to 33% (Mersinoglu Craggs, 2020). The definition of learning used in the survey is broad: ‘practising, studying or reading something [or] being taught, instructed or coached’ (Learning and Work Institute, 2019, p. 8) and aligns with the broad definitions of learning mentioned above. Within the formal learning environment, there is evidence of a year-on-year decline of adult learners (over 30) in HE between 2013/14 (23%) and 2017/18 (20%) (HESA, 2019b). Within the FE sector however there has been increasing participation in HE, in 2017/18, 49%
of students were over the age of 25 compared with 47% in 2016/17 (Association of Colleges, 2021).

While the number of full-time adult learners in England (aged 25 and over) has seen a slight increase since 2014/15 the part-time sector is seeing a continuing reduction in participation since higher fees were introduced in 2011/12 (HESA), 2020. Although evidence suggests that part-time student numbers had been declining up until 2010/11, sector data reveals a significant fall in part-time undergraduate entrants in England between 2010 and 2015 (Callender and Thompson, 2018).

The intention of the Robbins Report (1963) was to enable participation in HE for all those who had the ability and desire to enter HE. Realising this ambition has possibly been at the expense of adult learners. At the time of the Dearing Review (1997), 33% of young people were in HE compared with 6% in 1963 (Robbins, 1963). In 2014/15, 48% of young people were in HE (Department for Education, 2018b). The increased number of full-time university entrants paved the way for changes to fees and funding, as the grant system which existed up until 1992 and provided HE free to students was considered to be unsustainable. The long-term impact of this change has been catastrophic for adult learners, as providers were able to charge tuition fees of £1,000 per year in 1997 (Dearing, 1997), £3,000 in 2004 (HE Act) and up to £9,000 from 2011/12 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010).

Other policy decisions have also worked against part-time adult learners. A loans system to pay for increased tuition fees was not made available to part-time students until 2012 (Hillman, 2015) at the time when fees were increased to £9,000. Financial barriers which had been removed for many full-time students existed for part-time learners eight years after the introduction of student loans. However, additional barriers remained due to the eligibility criteria for accessing a student loan. Students who already had an undergraduate qualification or who were studying at less than 25% of full-time study intensity were excluded from applying (Attwood, 2009; Gov.uk, 2019). The Equivalent or Lower Qualification rule (ELQ) was subsequently revoked to include students wishing to study science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM) courses. This decision is more likely to be based on the need to fill skills gaps within STEM rather than a concession to address the decline in part-time student numbers.
However, adult learners wishing to study to change career outside of STEM subjects, remained excluded.

The availability of a student loan was based upon registering for a qualification which did not take the form of modular study. This mitigated against providers offering less rigidly structured qualifications, such as the OU. The OU’s flagship offer, the Open degree, enables students to study individual modules of various credits and across different disciplines. Prior to the availability of student loans, credits could be accumulated until 240 were gained to qualify for a degree or 360 for an Honours degree. Only programmes of study leading to a qualification are eligible for student loans. Whilst students are therefore still able to study on a modular basis, they are required to state their intended qualification at the beginning of their studies, in order to access the loan. This is likely to be counter-intuitive to widening participation initiatives. A survey undertaken on behalf of Universities UK revealed that 82% of adults aged between 18 and 60 (number interviewed = 1591) were interested in studying individual modules of a university degree (Universities UK, 2020). This suggests a gradual accumulation of credits through short, module-based study options may be more attractive to adult learners.

The exclusion of financial assistance for students with existing HE-level qualifications and studying at less than 25% intensity appears to be based on evidence that suggests they cost more to fund. The arguments are based on the Resource Accounting and Budgeting (RAB) charge which is the calculation of the cost of financial support to the State. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) estimated the RAB charge in 2015 to be 45% for full-time students and 65% for part-time students (Conlon and Halterbeck, 2015). This suggests that part-time students cost the government and taxpayer more than full-time students and provides the rationale for reducing part-time provision. What proponents of this argument fail to report is that part-time learners are more likely to pay off their loans earlier. They are also more likely to take out lower value loans, supplemented by their employment. The unsustainability argument of increasing participation to HE mentioned above appears less relevant to adult learners despite them being disproportionately affected by policy decisions to reduce funding. The cost to the government is, therefore, potentially a lot less than is reported (Conlon and Halterbeck, 2015), and the rationale
for reducing opportunities for adult learners to engage in HE in terms of provision and cost may be flawed.

While the introduction of student loans for part-time students engaging in HE for the first time, is a step towards removing some of the financial barrier to studying for adult learners, it does not resolve the dilemma faced by adult learners in weighing up the cost of HE against the potential benefits. This perspective places the individual as central to the decision to engage in HE, negotiating the challenges that they face as a result of policy decisions, rather than seeing them as being supported through their journey by policymakers. It contradicts much of the discourse within education policy which seemingly places a high value on lifelong learning, encompassing all aspects of learning and education, through formal, non-formal and informal learning environments (Dearing, 1997; Kennedy, 1997), which is not played out in practice.

Changes to fees and funding do not appear to have had the same impact on younger students who fall within widening participation criteria, as they have on adult learners, suggesting that cost is not in itself a barrier (Gorard and Smith, 2006). Dispositional, situational, institutional and sociocultural barriers also heavily impact on engagement in learning (Gorard, Rees and Fevre, 1999; Merrill, 2007; Biesta, 2008; Tuckett and Field, 2016; OFS, 2020c).

Dispositional barriers relate to psychological issues that manifest themselves in individuals’ perceptions of not being good enough (Cross, 1981); situational barriers relate to practical barriers such as lack of time, money, transport or meeting the demands of work and family commitments (Butcher, 2015b); institutional barriers relate to flexibility within providers in terms of timetabling and facilities (OFFA, 2017); and sociocultural barriers relate to differences in cultures and upbringing that can be grounded within gendered and cultural stereotypes of who and who should not participate in learning (Gallacher et al., 2002).

Barriers to participation are also likely to be exacerbated by other characteristics associated with adult learners. Adult learners are more sensitive to price, more debt averse and more likely to make judgements to participate based on existing financial and personal commitments (Spellman, 2015; OFS, 2020c). They are more likely to weigh up the risks and benefits of embarking on HE level study than younger students.
(OFS, 2020c), particularly as the impact of a new qualification in terms of higher salary or a change in career, is not likely to be felt immediately (Butcher, 2015b). Vocations not renowned for their high salaries such as health and education, but attractive to women (Spellman, 2015) are perhaps harder to quantify in terms of the benefits to the individuals who engage with them. This may explain why benefits associated with personal development are not as visible within political discourse.

Because existing commitments may prevent them from travelling beyond their immediate vicinity, adult learners are also restricted in terms of where they can study (Fowle and Butcher, 2017). This is a situation less likely to be experienced by younger students, although research does suggest that more younger students from disadvantaged backgrounds live at home (Mannerings, 2018). In addition, the marketisation of the HE sector through the creation of more autonomous universities, operating within a supply and demand model (Brown, no date), has impacted part-time provision. This approach creates the environment whereby the need to increase revenue, provide value for money, reduce costs and raise quality, results in a focus on provision where there is highest demand (full-time) and where subsidies and grants may still be available from the government, particularly for ‘high-value subjects’ such as STEM. Internally, this can create tensions between marketing departments and those working to widen participation (McGivney, 1990). The result of this has been the reduction of the breadth of provision for part-time HE as providers focus on those qualifications which are less expensive to deliver (Callender, 2015), generate more revenue (Spellman, 2015) and where participation is likely to be higher (Scott, 2015). The resulting reduction in the provision of part-time courses has further impacted the choices available for those adult learners who wish to study.

Widening participation policy aims to counteract the impact of increased fees within this market-driven environment, on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The introduction of Access Agreements as part of the National Strategy for Access and Student Success (Department for Business, 2014) ensured that HE providers committed to removing financial barriers to participation and supporting success for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Therefore, it might be expected that policies aimed at supporting widening participation students into and through HE would benefit adult learners as well as
younger students. However, the reduction in the number of students studying part-time is evidence that widening participation policy is not working in relation to adults (Vieru, 2015). Adult learners have subsequently been included in Access and Participation Plan Guidance (OFS, 2019e), although given there is no explicit mention of part-time, it could be assumed that the focus is on full-time adult learners. This is likely to result in the rather narrow focus on adult learners which relates to the discussion about how adult learners are defined in terms of their age, with younger adults more likely to study full-time than older adults, due to the latter’s existing commitments (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015). A potential solution to this is providers refocusing on what returning to learning means for all adult learners, considering how they may need to change their approaches to attracting and supporting adult learners through their undergraduate studies.

2.5. Widening participation to HE for adult learners

Approaches to support adult learners into HE are to be welcomed by proponents of adult learning (HEPI, 2015). Providing adults with opportunities to develop confidence through flexible study patterns that enable study alongside other responsibilities move beyond financial barriers which are not considered to be a major influence in adult learner participation, according to Biesta (2008). The reward of small successes in a low risk, non-threatening environment creates the conditions within which adult learners can begin to develop their confidence to participate in further learning or more generally for personal fulfilment (Cross, 1981). For some, participation in further learning is likely to be sooner. For others, initial engagement within this environment is enough to provide them with the learning experience that they need to participate more fully in work and society (Inman, 2006). The success of initiatives to provide wider access to HE for adult learners is dependent on the extent to which previous experiences of education have impacted on the individual (Cross, 1981) and also the motivation behind the desire to learn (Biesta, 2008). For some, learning is ingrained within an individual’s disposition; for others, engagement in learning occurs sporadically as the need and desire arises throughout the life-course; and for others, formal learning is not on the radar (Biesta, 2008; Schuller and Watson, 2009). While personal agency and the desire for fulfilment are contributory factors
(Butcher, 2015a), engagement in formal learning may be influenced by more factors than simply personal choice.

Parental influences (OFS, 2020c), supportive networks of peer groups, and access to appropriate and effective advice and guidance all contribute to discussions as to whether an individual engages in formal learning at an early age (Tuckett and Field, 2016). This impacts upon engagement in subsequent formal learning throughout the life-course and contributes to the learning divide between adults who participate in learning and those who do not (Sargent et al., 1997). The learning divide has become more visible as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Aldridge, Jones and Southgate, 2020), although evidence of its existence can be found in the Adult Participation in Learning surveys undertaken since 1996 (Learning and Work Institute, 2021). Younger adults (18 – 19 year-olds), full-time employees and those from higher socio-economic groups are more likely to engage in learning, in addition to those individuals with more years in initial education (Aldridge, Jones and Southgate, 2020).

Adult learners who make the decision to return to learning have often had poor past experiences of education (Crossan, et al., 2003; Askham, 2008, Pascall and Cox, 1993, Merrill, 2007, McGivney, 1990) which have created the conditions for disengagement in formal education up to that point (Biesta, 2008; Tuckett and Field, 2016). The decision to engage in HE can be stimulated by a traumatic experience such as illness, the death of a close friend/relative or another life-changing event, which prompts the prospective learner to re-evaluate their own lives and make sense of their experiences (McGivney, 1990; Crossan et al., 2003; Merrill, 2007).

Negative experience of previous education impacts upon confidence, particularly in terms of academic ability, as adults return to learning (Goodchild, 2017; Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001). Approaches to widening participation that provide opportunities for the development of confidence and study skills within a risk-free and non-threatening environment aim to combat these negative experiences. This context provides the opportunity to support adult learners gently back into formal learning as adults contend with the weaknesses they have been conditioned to believe from their previous experiences (Cross, 1981).
The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) the predecessor to the OFS, commissioned a project to understand the impact of outreach to access HE for adults learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (OFFA, 2017). A handful of widening participation initiatives within the HE sector specifically aimed at adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been out of education for some time were presented. Through five case studies across four university settings, the report highlighted a range of approaches that reinforce the need for a gradual reintroduction to learning through both informal and formal learning environments. Three of the case studies focus on curriculum in the form of foundation, access and introductory courses, one explores the journey from informal to formal learning, and the final case study focuses on engaging with communities and supporting adults into the HE environment through learning champions.

Key findings from the report suggest that to enable continued successful participation in HE by adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, institutions should focus on:

- the need for individualised support
- the need for effective information, advice and guidance
- the need for institutions and policymakers to listen to the voices of adult learners
- the need for inter-disciplinary flexibility in a curriculum aimed at adult learners
- the need for a sector-wide community of practice

These findings support the evidence that suggests institutions need to provide flexibility and stability, as well as personal, pastoral and academic support for adult learners (Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011; Butcher, 2015; Goodchild and Butler, 2020; Merrill, 2015; Million Plus and NUS, 2012; Office for Students, 2020). They support arguments for inclusivity within the learning environment, often associated with disability (Tomlinson, 1996) but equally applicable to many of the student groups identified within widening participation policy. Such an approach enables the needs of all individuals to be met within mainstream provision through the process of universal design (Rao, 2015) rather than the provision of bespoke support initiatives for the minority. Recognition of the experience and maturity that adult learners bring to the HE environment, in addition to their enthusiasm to contribute, is also significant but contradicts the evidence that suggests adult learners lack
confidence (Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001; Waller, 2006; Askham, 2008; Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011; Million Plus and NUS, 2012). These characteristics are not explicitly identified within the OFFA case studies but are relevant in that they move away from deficit thinking, discussed in Section 2.4.

Attracting adult learners – particularly those over 30 - into HE is challenging enough as they are not typically found within a school or college setting. In addition, once they are on board consideration needs to be given to other factors to ensure adult learners are supported into and through their educational journey. The evaluation matrix developed through the OFFA project (OFFA), 2017) suggests that providers should review their provision with adult learners in mind, focusing specifically on:

- facilities to support adult learners, e.g. crèche, flexible library opening hours, accessible public transport
- flexible timetables
- awareness of the needs of adult learners by academic and student support staff
- provision of personalised support, e.g. learning champions/mentors
- specialist information, advice and guidance for adult learners
- clear advice around progression pathways
- a preparatory curriculum to support adults taking their first steps to HE
- recognition and responsiveness to the unique and diverse characteristics of adult learners.

These recommendations speak directly to the multiple identities and personal histories that adult learners bring to the educational setting (Askham, 2008; Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011; Mason, 2018) and the interplay between study and other life responsibilities (Butcher, 2015b). However, beyond the preparatory courses that focus on developing confidence and overcoming anxieties the recommendations focus on responding to their current needs as adults rather than needs based on their previous educational experiences. There is an assumption that once confidence has been developed through preparatory courses, the learners’ needs are about overcoming structural barriers to participation, learning support and support to overcome the challenges that they face, given the multitude of responsibilities they
have. There is no reference to alternative or enhanced pedagogical models that reflect the particular characteristics of adult learners who return to learning not only with anxieties as a result of their past experiences but also with pre-existing assumptions about themselves and the world within which they live. Addressing this particular issue through alternative approaches to adult learning is bounded within the concept of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991).

2.6. Transformative learning

The concept of transformative learning and the emancipatory benefits that HE brings provides a more realistic interpretation of what engaging in HE means for many adult learners, particularly those taking non-vocational qualifications (Mezirow, 1991). This in turn impacts upon society as a whole, improving health and well-being and community cohesion (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013). This perception of HE in its broadest sense could be viewed as equally important and complementary to the arguments around social mobility and widening participation which are often defined in economic terms. In reality, the dominance of economic benefits often overshadows the individual and wider societal benefits.

Social mobility has become a central tenet of widening participation policy, and the development of a Social Mobility Advisory Group (Universities UK, 2016) demonstrated a commitment to supporting individuals from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds to develop the ability to move up in the world (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). Early widening participation policies, which primarily excluded adult learners, focused their efforts on raising aspirations to progress to HE. The AimHigher initiative (Higher Education Academy, 2016) ran from 2004 - 2010, prior to further programmes to be implemented between 2014 and 2025.

The National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) was the first outreach programme following AimHigher and ran between 2014/15 and 2015/16 (HEFCE, 2017). Both this and AimHigher were based on the notion that individuals should strive to better themselves (HM Government, 2011; Bathmaker, et al., 2016; The Bridge Group, 2016). Adult learners were not excluded from NNCO and initiatives developed to support adult learners returning to learning (including formal and non-
formal) were funded (Open University, 2021). The National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NCOP) programme (renamed UniConnect) succeeded NNCO and ran from 2017 to 2019. It refocused attention on areas where participation in HE by young people was generally low but also lower than expected given the GCSE results that were reported. It also focused on 15-year-old pupils on the GCSE Grade D/C border, to raise attainment rather than aspiration (OFS, 2019). The specific focus on younger students meant that adult learners were subsequently excluded from this funding. Phase 2 of the UniConnect programme ran from 2019 to 2021 (OFS, 2021) and focused on targeted outreach to school-aged children (13-18 year-olds) within local areas (the same as in phase 1) plus the development of outreach hubs across the 29 partnerships. The next phase of UniConnect will run from 2022 – 2025 but is predominantly following the same format as phase 2. This approach explicitly excludes older adults who form the basis for this thesis, as funding is aimed at school-aged pupils within specific localities and for whom there are no alternative funded outreach programmes. The focus on raising attainment and aspiration is not necessarily at odds with approaches to attracting adult learners into HE in terms of developing the belief that HE is possible. However, the concept of social mobility which relates to higher skill levels, higher earnings or moving up the social ladder as a result of participation in HE is potentially misleading. This is particularly relevant in relation to the transformative aspects of learning which do not necessarily align with these ideals.

From an economic perspective, HE is pivotal to meeting the needs of the economy because graduates contribute to meeting the higher level skills needed (HEFCE, 2016) in an increasingly global competitive world (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010), enabling faster innovation and technology transfer (Adnett, 2016), increased productivity, and competitiveness and profitability within businesses (Million Plus, 2013). A focus on social mobility predominantly aims to meet economic needs, the success of which is measured in terms of graduate outcomes.

Adult learners in HE are more likely to be in employment and have existing financial commitments requiring them to study alongside full- or part-time employment (Butcher, 2015). At the OU (the largest provider of flexible distance learning in the UK), 74% of directly registered students work full- or part-time during their studies.
(Open University, 2021b). Retraining or upskilling through HE-level study is not likely to have an immediate impact on adult learners within this context (Fowle and Butcher, 2017) as would be the situation for younger students. The latter generally study full-time with the aim of securing graduate-level employment soon after qualifying. The economic skills argument, therefore, is out of sync with the needs and motivations of adult learners, which reflect previous arguments relating to lifelong learning and the transformative benefits of learning throughout the life-course. This presents a challenge in terms of how success is measured which cannot be reduced to skills levels or social status.

2.6.1. Measuring ‘success’ for adult learners

The focus on tangible measures relating to widening participation is particularly relevant for adult learners, for whom alternative measures of success may be more appropriate. Success, from a widening participation policy perspective, is often measured by analysing data for different groups of students, e.g. ethnicity, age, disability, index of multiple deprivation (IMD), and participation areas at different points in the student journey:

1. Student recruitment - is the student body diverse and representative?
2. Attainment - are there gaps in the award of ‘good degrees’ (2:1 or first)
3. Progression – are there gaps in progression to higher skilled employment and further study between different student groups?

(OFS, 2019b)

The focus on diversity and differential outcomes clearly aligns with equality, diversity and inclusion policies that aim to ensure equality of opportunity for all and reducing socio-economic inequalities (Equality Act 2010). Despite widening participation policies, differential outcomes remain evident for many students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds across the student lifecycle, including progression to higher skilled employment (OFS, 2020a). Graduates are more likely to earn more than their non-graduate counterparts. The graduate premium for graduates born in 1990 and aged 26, is being reported as 11%, although this premium has reduced by eight percentage points from graduates born in 1970 (HESA, 2019c). Differential graduate outcomes for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds (Hunter, 2018) suggest that the graduate premium,
while still evident, is likely to be less for these students. These statistics must be viewed with slight caution, however, as the availability of grants during the 1970s meant that students did not graduate massively in debt as is the case now, and therefore the graduate premium is likely to be higher during that earlier period of time.

Mature graduate earnings (25+) are reported as being 25% higher than younger graduates based on a higher level of experience in the workplace and enhanced by their undergraduate qualification (Pearson College, 2016). This statistic may not, however, represent the situation for mature graduates who have had more extensive work experience over a longer time period. Employers may be more likely to recruit younger graduates who have some work experience but too much experience can be negatively perceived in terms of candidates being overqualified. The advantage of experience and an undergraduate qualification therefore reduces with age (Pearson College, 2016).

For adult graduates and particularly those in the older age brackets identified by Schuller and Watson (2009), measuring success is complex, and is often related to the original motivations for HE study. Measuring the impact of an HE level qualification, six months from graduation as presented through the Destination of Leavers of HE (DLHE) survey is less meaningful for adults for whom changing career or developing within their existing career is not likely to occur immediately (Fowle and Butcher, 2017). The shift toward graduate outcomes (GO) data which surveys graduates 15 months after graduation, offers a better likelihood of capturing the impact of adult learners’ undergraduate qualification in terms of employment outcomes.

Neither DLHE nor GO data reflect the impact of HE study on personal development for adult learners (Department for Education, 2018a) but the emphasis is placed on highly skilled employment and further study. An internal survey at the OU (the Employability of Qualifiers Survey (EQS) offers some insight into the impact of HE study on students’ personal development. It shows that in 2019 91% of respondents with low previous educational qualifications agreed or strongly agreed that their OU study had helped or would help them to achieve their personal (non-career-related) goals. This compares with 77% of students with low previous educational
qualifications responding that their OU study had helped or would help them to achieve their career goals. The omission of this measure within the Graduate Outcomes survey therefore misses the transformative impact of learning which, while relevant to all learners, is particularly relevant to adult learners. Appendix 2 provides further information on the EQS.

Measures of success within the context of widening participation to HE for adult learners need to be reframed to recognise this distinctive environment in which adult learners participate, and for which the anticipated outcomes, identified for younger students, may be less appropriate. Measuring the transformative nature of HE, while no less important than measuring economic and employment outcomes (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013), is more challenging (Schuller, 2017), particularly as the benefits of learning are more subtle and personal (Billet, 2017). Measures of success for adult learners should therefore recognise and reflect these differences, acknowledging the heterogeneity, in terms of ethnicity, disability, gender and poverty within this cohort (Stuart and Thomson, 1995; McGivney, 1996; Bamber and Tett, 2000; Merrill, 2004). This will be addressed in the following section.

2.6.2. Learning through the life-course

The principles of transformative learning relate predominantly to adult learners, based upon the evidence that suggests the needs of learners change as individuals mature (Mezirow, 1991; Schuller and Watson, 2009; Illeris, 2017). Schuller and Watson (2009) develop the concept of the changing learning needs of individuals through the identification of four key stages of the life-course: up to 25, 25 – 50, 50 to 75 and over 75). They suggest that funding priorities should be re-balanced towards stages 3 and 4 in recognition of participants’ changing learning needs (Table 1 Stages of the life-course (adapted from Schuller and Watson, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Learning requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>18 – 25</td>
<td>Learning and development is readily accessible and available to all young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>25 – 50</td>
<td>Learning to support productivity and prosperity, building family and community and a personal identity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 3 50 – 75 Enhancement of learning and training opportunities which focus more on productivity and prosperity.

Stage 4 75+ An appropriate approach to curriculum for later life is required.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Learning requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>Birth to 11/13</td>
<td>Learning focuses on the child developing and capturing its world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>11/13 to 20/35</td>
<td>Development of a personal identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td>20/35 to 45/65</td>
<td>Management of the life course and its challenges. Focus on work, family, lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature Adulthood</td>
<td>45/65 to death</td>
<td>Focus on bringing about meaning and harmony in life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1 Stages of the life-course (adapted from Schuller and Watson, 2009).**

Illeris (2017) offers a similar model to that of Schuller and Watson, dividing the life-course into childhood, youth, adulthood and mature adulthood (Table 2). He argues that the progression from childhood through to mature adulthood represents a shift in the responsibility for learning for which adults should increasingly bear the cost as they dictate what, when and how they learn.

**Table 2 Illeris's phases of development**

While Schuller and Watson’s (2009) representation provides an indication of the different stages of the life-course based on learning needs at a particular age, Illeris (2017) uses behaviours to determine the stages of development rather than age, an approach endorsed by Merriam and Brockett (1997). What constitutes adult learning is therefore dependent upon where an individual is perceived or perceives themselves to be positioned across very broad categories that are open for interpretation.

This concurs with arguments that suggest there is no longer a linear life-plan as may have been expected in earlier decades (Sheey, 1996; Kasworm, 2001; Field, 2006). Rubenson (2011). While these approaches do not map perfectly against each other, there are clearly similarities in terms of the identification of the learning needs of individuals as they progress through the life-course.
This viewpoint that different life-stages are driven by changing learning needs, requiring different approaches to learning potentially explains funding decisions based on economic priorities, as learning in later life for self-development is considered a personal choice which should be funded by the individual. However, if learning is considered to be essential for both the economy, society and the individual, there is an argument for all learning to be supported by the State.

Currently, learning for self-development and personal fulfilment is a neglected aspect of lifelong learning within policy settings, particularly in relation to HE and so-called ‘low value’ degrees (Department for Education, 2019a). This covers subjects, such as those in the Arts and Humanities which are not perceived to contribute to the economy in the same way as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects do, despite the lower cost of their delivery. While neither broad grouping is specifically vocational in nature, higher value is clearly placed on subjects that are perceived as contributing more explicitly to economic productivity and competitiveness than others. This does nothing for adult learners who are typically more likely to engage with the so-called ‘low value’ subjects (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2007).

2.6.3. Supporting transformative learning

Life-wide learning throughout the life-course contributes to personal development and an increasing sense of confidence to engage in the community and society as a whole (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Models that represent the different stages of the life-course provide the basis from which alternative approaches to the teaching of adults are required, particularly as adults take more responsibility for their learning (Illeris, 2017). This transition from child to adult learner is driven by motivations to be a good role model, the need for intellectual stimulation and personal fulfilment as well as the desire to reskill, upskill or retrain (Million Plus and NUS, 2012; Butcher, 2015a). This perspective relates well to the concept of learning through the life-course and the differing needs of individuals as they mature (Schuller and Watson, 2009; Illeris, 2017, Merriam and Brockett, 1997). The term andragogy, originating back in the 19th century (Loeng, 2017) and made popular by Malcolm Knowles during the 1960s and 1970s (Knowles, 1980) offers a
particular perspective on what defines an adult learner and provides an alternative model of learning to the learning of children.

The basic premise of andragogy is that adult learners are independent, autonomous and self-directed, taking ownership of their own learning to meet specific aims and goals (Knowles, 1980). The role of the educator from this perspective becomes one of facilitator rather than instructor (Freire, 1974; Jarvis, 2003). Rubenson (1998) and Grow (1991) suggest that whilst the desire to learn may be self-directed, the extent to which adult learners are independent and autonomous varies between individuals. Teaching strategies therefore differ depending on which stage a learner is positioned.

Within the American literature, the concept of andragogy focuses specifically on individualisation and self-realisation (Knowles, 1980; Loeng and Omwami, 2018), in contrast to the European perspective where it relates to adult learning to bring about social change (Loeng and Omwami, 2018). Both perspectives clearly align with the concept of lifelong learning and the transformative benefits that learning can bring (Faure, 1972; Delors, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1998). The very nature of the concept of andragogy and associated approaches to learning embedded within it suggests that adult learning is distinct from children’s learning. There are debates as to whether andragogy is a theory, model or framework for adult learning or whether it just represents a different approach to the teaching of adults (Loeng and Omwami, 2018). Whether it is a distinct field in its own right is debateable as it combines psychology, sociology and philosophy within its sphere of influence (Davenport in Loeng and Omwami, 2018). Arguments against the concept of andragogy relate specifically to whether some aspects of adult learning are also relevant to children’s learning (Loeng and Omwami, 2018). It has been suggested that, rather than a dichotomy between the teaching of children (pedagogy) and the teaching of adults (andragogy) (Loeng and Omwami, 2018), progression into adult learning should be seen as a continuum, supporting the broad definition of lifelong learning – from cradle to grave (Field, 2006).

From an andragogical perspective, the teaching of adults is different from the teacher-led approaches considered more reflective of compulsory education. These teacher-led approaches are delivered within a pre-determined curriculum within pedagogical models that present pupils as passive recipients of information (Sharifi,
Soleimani and Jafarigohar, 2017). Children’s learning has, for 30 years been typically dictated by the national curriculum set by the government (Department for Education, 2014). While there may be some flexibility in the approaches taken by schools themselves, the boundaries of what and how children are taught within state schools, is dominated by the wider national educational context. In post-compulsory education, through the marketisation of the HE sector, adult learners are seemingly afforded greater choice and autonomy in what, where and how they learn. However, these choices are still restricted by policymaker priorities on what should and should not be funded. In this sense, the provision of adult learning and children’s learning is not dissimilar.

The boundaries between these two models of learning are also blurred in the approaches to learning that are considered to be most appropriate for compulsory and post-compulsory education. The development of critical thinking, the teacher as a facilitator of learning, and the participation of students through group work and discussion - all characteristics of andragogy (Knowles, 1980) - can also be applied to children’s learning, even though they are often espoused in compulsory education but not necessarily practiced. This throws into dispute the very idea that adult learning is significantly different from that of children’s (Loeng and Omwami, 2018).

Similarly, approaches to teaching focusing on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil, the ‘banking’ model of education (Freire, 1972), may serve a particular purpose for adult learners, for instance for those who dip in and out of learning to meet short-term goals or specific needs (Biesta, 2008). This approach is also likely to be relevant to children in the development of basic skills before more advanced approaches to learning can be implemented. These observations support the idea of learning across the life-course, with learning needs changing as individuals mature, suggesting a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Sharifi, Soleimani and Jafarigohar, 2017; Illeris, 2018; Loeng and Omwami, 2018).

‘As individuals mature, their self-concept moves from dependency to independency; they accumulate a reservoir of life experiences; their readiness to learn becomes closely related to the developmental tasks of social roles; and their time and curricular
Amidst the criticisms of andragogy as a concept, are approaches to the adult learner which offer an alternative interpretation of the processes through which adult learning is distinct from children’s learning. The dominant theory bases its assumptions on the notion that adults return to learning with huge life experience and multiple identities (Askham, 2008). In contrast, by their very nature, children’s life experiences are generally more limited than adults. Hence, there is an argument for a specific approach to learning for adults which encourages adult learners to challenge the assumptions brought about by these life experiences. This perspective is embraced by the concept of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994) which encourages individuals to challenge their position within the political and sociological landscape with a view to enacting change, whether that is from an individual or societal perspective. The critical pedagogical approach engages both the student and teacher in a dialectic relationship whereby each becomes an active participant in learning through a process of conscientisation and self-actualisation (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994). It is within this process that transformative learning occurs, building on the assumptions made within the concept of andragogy (Mezirow, 1991; hooks, 1994; Field, 2006) with a view to liberating minds (hooks, 1994).

2.6.4. Liberating minds

Critical pedagogy aims to create the conditions within which learners are encouraged to reflect critically upon the dominant structures and ideologies within which learning is framed. It aims to help learners to challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions of others with a view to creating better consciousness of the social constructs which impact all aspects of life (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994). From an adult-learning perspective, these concepts aim to raise awareness of deeply embedded assumptions which develop as individuals progress from childhood to adulthood, and which frame the dominant structures within society. In this learning model, students and tutors are active participants through a process of self-actualisation, and perpetual learning is gained by all those involved.
Freire’s approach appears revolutionary and politically motivated at first glance, particularly with regard to the language he uses, referring to oppressors and the oppressed. The value of his work in my thesis is in the fact that he does not propose the extreme radical overhaul of existing societal structures that other early writers of critical theory propose (Binner, 2017) nor that one shifts from being the oppressed to the oppressor. The application of his approach to adult learners reflects the more subtle consideration of understanding an individual’s position within society, how that might shape their identities and how they can be supported to explore alternative perspectives which might challenge their existing assumptions. Freire (1972) argues that education through critical pedagogy creates the conditions which enable the emancipation of adults within existing structures, a position reflected within the work of early education thinkers such as Eduard Lindeman and Robert Peers, specifically in relation to the facilitative nature of the role of the teacher (Jarvis, 2001). Through a process of ‘conscientisation’ individuals develop an awareness of their position within a given context, and a recognition of how what they come to assume and take for granted is constructed by dominant ideologies. Critical pedagogy creates the environment in which this process of transition can occur. The theory challenges the ‘banking model of education’ whereby teachers impart knowledge to passive recipients without any clear sense of how that individual can use that information to create new knowledge.

Framed within Freire’s general concept of critical pedagogy, Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory offers an approach that relates specifically to adult learning which distinguishes between the process of teaching adults and that of children. He builds on the work of the sociologist Jurgen Habermas (1984) who believed that we learn through communicative action. Habermas and Mezirow’s approaches are similar in terms of the rational, methodical way in which learning takes place. They suggest that through a process of ‘validity testing’ it becomes possible to present a point of view which is understood and accepted by another, and which then acts as a basis for new learning to occur. The emphasis in this process is on the communication and interaction that creates the conditions from which new knowledge is created or existing knowledge is reinforced.
Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory adapts to the context of adult learning by presenting the initial quest for learning within the concept of a disorientating dilemma. This is particularly relevant for adult learners as they often return to learning with a view to transforming their lives in some way as a result of a traumatic or life-changing experience (Biesta, 2008; McGivney, 1990). Mezirow’s theory suggests that there are ten stages in the transformative learning process:

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Sense of alienation
4. Relating discontent to others
5. Explaining options of new behaviour
6. Building confidence in new ways
7. Planning a course of action
8. Knowledge to implement plans
9. Experimenting with new roles
10. Reintegration.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory provides a more nuanced approach to adult learning. It shifts the focus away from the perspective that suggests adult learners are self-directed, autonomous and goal-oriented towards the process through which these three andragogic principles might be achieved. The theory bases its arguments on the idea that adults engage in learning having already established a level of embedded assumptions about the world in which they inhabit. This is significantly different from younger students who have not had the same life experience as adults. Focusing on adult learning specifically, the role of the tutor is to facilitate the dialogue with and between students through active participation. Beyond the formal learning environment, however, there is a reliance on the individual to engage in this process independently, autonomously and often subconsciously (Field, 2006).

Transformative learning theory has been criticised for this narrow focus on the individual, which may neglect the wider context within which learning occurs. It also assumes that individuals have the capabilities to implement reflective practice independently. In addition, there is a shift away from andragogy and critical pedagogy.
and the active role of the tutor in the learning process. Transformative learning theory may, therefore, not adequately describe the needs of adults within the context of widening participation and the broad concepts of life-wide and lifelong learning.

In a similar way that andragogy was criticised for being presented as a distinct field (Davenport in Loeng and Omwami, 2018), Jarvis (2009) argues that interactions need to combine sociology, psychology and philosophy in order for the whole person to learn. He builds on Kolb’s (1984) cycle of learning which depicts learning through a process of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation, and is closely aligned with Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory.

![Jarvis's model of learning](taken from Jarvis, 2009, p. 18).

In this model, learning is represented as a fluid process that begins with the person positioned within a situation which creates an experience. A process of learning then occurs at different levels of complexity. At a simplistic level, learning takes place through the reinforcement of existing assumptions (4). In a more complex environment, a process of re-enactment (5), reflection and evaluation occurs prior to a change in the person’s knowledge and understanding (9). Jarvis’s model reflects the complexity of human learning which he criticised Kolb’s learning cycle for missing. This is particularly relevant in relation to adult learners, for whom complex histories, multiple identities and interactions across several domains create conditions which influence how and what they learn. A process by which individuals can begin to make
sense of and challenge the environments within which they are positioned, enables
the development of new or a reinforcement of old assumptions.

Despite the complexity inherent in adult learning, Mezirow (1991) and Jarvis (2009)
present their theories as rational processes over which individuals have control. This
is true particularly of Mezirow, who appears to oversimplify the very complex nature
of adult learning and the many external influences on it (Mezirow, 2018). None the
less, his theory does suggest an alternative view of adult learning which moves away
from a transmission model of learning, the typical approach within compulsory
school-based education. The approach is also evident in post-compulsory education
where undergraduate students fill large lecture theatres. For an adult learner
returning to learning for personal fulfilment, such an approach is not likely to be
inspirational or developmental. Indeed, some argue that transmissive, passive
recipient approaches to learning are equally flawed for younger learners (Freire,
1972; Shor, 1992). Approaches to widening participation to HE for adult learners
support the idea that some adult learners require developmental approaches to
enable them to build confidence to become autonomous and independent learners
(OFFA, 2017) and to develop critical thinking and reflective skills. This position rejects
the concept of an adult learning theory, given that younger pupils are also supported
to develop these skills as they mature. The challenge for adult learners becomes one
of overcoming issues of confidence as a result of their previous educational
experiences for which alternative approaches to learning may be required. The lack
of a clear distinction between adults and younger learners supports critics of adult
learning who suggest that its concept is too broad to enable one definitive theory of
adult learning to exist (Loeng, 2017; Mezirow, 2018).

In addition to identifying stages of learning that individuals go through as they
mature, Illeris (2017) developed a model of learning which is not dissimilar to that of
Jarvis (Figure 3).
Figure 3. Illeris’s three dimensions of learning and competence development.

Illeris suggests that for effective learning to take place, all three of his dimensions of learning must be fulfilled. It is a slightly different model from that of Mezirow and Jarvis in that it does not explicitly recognise the reflective nature of learning, which is thought to be particularly relevant to adult learning (Schon, 1994; Cox, 2005). While reflective practice is often associated with adult learning within professional environments, it does relate to approaches based on transformative learning theory which suggest adults reflect on their own assumptions of a range of situations rather than specifically relating to a professional context. Illeris’s model does support Jarvis’s approach in recognising external factors that influence learning, which is particularly relevant to adult learners who return to learning with other life experiences, responsibilities and pre-existing assumptions. While not specifically aimed at adult learners, the model is worthy of further exploration.

Table 3 below combines elements of these different models of learning to illustrate the applicability of these models within my thesis. The table combines the models with some of the wider literature relating to adult learning and learning more broadly but specifically within the context of approaches to widening participation to HE for adult learners returning to formal learning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge</td>
<td>• Incentive</td>
<td>• Critical pedagogy using experience or new content to challenge existing assumptions, making sense of new situations</td>
<td>• Reinforcement of existing assumptions</td>
<td>• Assessment is developmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mezirow (1991)</td>
<td>• New learning which creates a change within the individual</td>
<td>• Interdisciplinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Disorienting dilemma</td>
<td>Mezirow (1991)</td>
<td>• Study skills development embedded within pedagogical model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan (2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jarvis (2003)</td>
<td>• Relating discontent to others</td>
<td>• Self-reflection exercises at start of module</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mastery</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Situation</td>
<td>• Explaining options of new behaviour</td>
<td>• Tutor provides one-to-one pastoral support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meritocracy</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Experience</td>
<td>• Experimenting with new roles</td>
<td>• Regular telephone tutorials integral to the pedagogical model to provide academic and pastoral support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jarvis (2003)</td>
<td>• No formal contact with other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasoning and reflection</td>
<td>• Short modules to maintain motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Practice/experimentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Illeris (2017)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Action</td>
<td>First year of undergraduate studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Communication</td>
<td>• Study skills development embedded within pedagogical model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Co-operation</td>
<td>• Peer interaction through informal module forums as well as tutor-led tutorials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Field (2006)</td>
<td>• Modular-based study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conscious and subconscious learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Adult learners returning to learning framework.
In the first column, Illeris’s model and Tan’s concepts of ‘mastery, meritocracy and you’ are used to demonstrate the different aspects of learning, which are endorsed within educational and lifelong learning policy documents. These concepts relate to the acquisition of skills, developing a greater sense of understanding of a particular issue or concept and the generation of new knowledge. Whilst each can contribute to transformative learning across a number of formal learning environments, it is specifically understanding and knowledge that is relevant to adult learners in an HE environment upon which this thesis is based. It recognises that transformative learning can occur within vocational as well as non-vocational courses but that a policy focus on the former, could be detrimental to adult learners studying non-vocational courses.

The second column focuses on the models of Illeris, Mezirow and Jarvis in terms of identifying why learning is taking place. There are clear synergies within these models in terms of the motivations which are driving the learning need. For Illeris, the incentive could relate to the need to develop skills, to make sense of a situation or a desire for self-improvement. Mezirow’s concept of a disorienting dilemma aligns with the second of Illeris’s incentives and also Jarvis’s focus on situation and experience, supporting notions of transformative learning.

Column 3 incorporates the work of Freire, Mezirow, Jarvis, Illeris and Field in relation to how learning is taking place, combining elements of facilitated learning within critical pedagogy and reflective learning. Field’s notions of conscious and unconscious learning are also relevant here in relation to the criticisms of these models as being a rational process. In most models however, the concept of ‘reflective interaction’ is relevant.

Column 4 introduces the transformative elements of learning as explicitly identified by both Jarvis and Mezirow and specifically relevant to the focus of this thesis. It relates to how new learning is created through the processes identified within Column 3 or existing assumptions reinforced.

The final column applies the culmination of Columns 1 – 4 within the context of HE, specifically a programme designed to support adult learners returning to formal learning and subsequent introductory courses within an undergraduate qualification.
The first bullet relates the models to the developmental nature of formative learning designed into the Access programme at the OU. The interdisciplinary nature of the Access programme offering modules in Business and Law, People, Work and Society and Science, Technology and Maths and the embedding of study skills, reflects Illeris’s three areas of learning in terms of developing knowledge, understanding and skills. However the interactive element of learning endorsed within this literature is formally restricted to one-to-one telephone tutorials between the tutor and student, reflecting the developmental nature of the Access programme and supporting adult learners returning to formal learning with low confidence. Elements of critical pedagogy that suggest the need for the development of a shared identity amongst all participants within the learning environment, is also not part of the Access model. However, the length of the module does respond to the developmental nature of learning alluded to within the models of learning in Columns 1 – 4 particularly in relation to shorter courses being more appealing to adult learners (Universities UK, 2020).

The second set of three bullets relates to the introductory modules within the undergraduate programme whereby study skills is embedded within the pedagogical approach. It is challenging to be specific due to the different approaches taken within the individual programmes of study. Generally, in a move away from the one-to-one tutoring model adopted on the Access programme, the Level 4 undergraduate programmes offer both tutor-led tutorials and more informal environments which provide the opportunity for students to interact with each other and the tutor. This reflects the process of learning alluded to in Column 3, which whilst does not explicitly provide evidence that reflection is embedded within the model of learning, clearly embraces the benefits of interaction to the learning process. The final bullet also responds to the evidence that suggests adult learners prefer shorter and modular-based courses to build up their qualification (Universities UK, 2020) which the introductory modules (and all modules across all levels of the undergraduate programme) are designed to do. However, as with the Access programme, environments that enable a shared identity to be developed amongst participants is not built into the University’s undergraduate programmes beyond icebreaker sessions that are sometimes applied in face-to-face tutorials.
Through feedback from students studying on the Access programme at the Open University, via internal quality assurance reporting, the transformative benefits of learning based upon the pedagogical model presented in Table 3 are revealed, not only students who have undertaken an Access module but also as students progress onto their undergraduate studies. The Student Experience at the End of a Module (SEaM) survey is an optional survey distributed to students at the end of each module. Appendix 4 provides further detail of the survey.

Over the two academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19 responses from students with low previous educational qualifications aged between 25 and 55 reveal that students who had just completed their Access module were more likely to agree that their studies had helped them to develop their self-confidence than students who had started at Level 4 (89.4% compared to 80%). This is perhaps unsurprising given the specific pedagogical model applied to the Access programme. Responses from students on a Level 4 module who had completed an Access module compared to students who had not, reveal that the former were also more likely to agree with this statement than the latter (7.3 percentage point gap2).

Analysis of the University’s Module Metric Student Profile Demographic Dashboard also supports these findings in terms of more quantitative measures of success. It reveals that students with low PEQs are less likely to complete or pass their Level 4 module (9.2 percentage point gap3 and 10.2 percentage point gap4 respectively) compared with students with higher PEQs. The analysis also reveals that students with low PEQs who have undertaken an Access module are more likely to complete and pass their Level 4 module (5 percentage point gap for completion and 5.1 percentage point gap for pass) than those who have studied straight onto a Level 4 module.

---

2 Percentage points differences refers to the gap between the two variables e.g. students who had completed an Access module agreeing with the statement compared to students who had not completed an Access module agreeing with the statement

3 Average module completion for students with low PEQs in 2017/18 and 2018/19 was 62.6% compared to 71.8% for students with high PEQs. This equates to a 9.2 percentage point gap between the two variables.

4 In relation to module passes for the same period, 59.3% of students with low PEQs passed their modules compared to 69.5% of students with high PEQs. This equates to a 10.2 percentage point gap.
There is therefore a need for further exploration into the reasons for these discrepancies. Given the known challenges that adult learners returning to formal learning face in terms of their previous educational experiences, their homogeneity and multiple identities (Waller, 2006; Askham, 2008; Butcher, 2015b) it is worth questioning whether approaches to widening participation effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning.

2.7. Chapter summary

Across the UK, Europe and globally, there is a general recognition of the value of the transformative power of learning, delivered through lifelong and life-wide learning. Some of the pedagogical models informing approaches to widening participation for adult learners encourage a focus on personal development as a priority, recognising that adult learners returning to formal learning face anxieties in relation to their academic ability and confidence. In England, Access and Participation Plan Guidance (OFS, 2019a) to encourage more adult learners into HE is therefore welcomed, particularly as the number of part-time students (the majority of whom are adults) has fallen dramatically in the past ten years. While broad educational policies recognise the value of learning in its widest sense, in practice they adopt a very narrow focus, prioritising filling skills gaps that meet the needs of the local economy and enable global competitiveness. As a result, transformative learning, often the motivation for adult learners, is neglected, as evidenced by fees and funding that prioritise support for younger students to access HE. This negatively impacts adult learners whose decision to return to learning is perceived as a personal choice rather than born of necessity, particularly in subjects that are considered ‘low value’. Greater alignment is needed between the aim of enabling access to HE for all who have the desire and potential to succeed, and broader educational policies.

This realignment could promote the benefits of learning to the economy, community and society through the development of individuals at different stages of their lives. As it currently stands, there is a misalignment between lifelong learning policy which promotes all of these benefits, educational policy which focuses primarily on the need to meet the needs of the economy and widening participation initiatives, which are predominantly aimed at school leavers and adults who have only recently completed compulsory education. In order to achieve this, providers of formal
learning would benefit from acknowledging the need for alternative approaches to adult learners returning to formal learning (particularly older adults) recognising the experiences that adults bring to the learning environment which create often deeply rooted assumptions. In response pedagogical models would enable individuals to challenge these assumptions to validate or develop existing beliefs, developing their confidence throughout their learning journey.

As we have seen, there is no clear definition of adult learning. It is also clear that no single available model of learning comprehensively describes adult learner needs. There is an opportunity to use the experience of the OU to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent within the context of adult learners returning to formal learning. The study reported in this thesis will, therefore, explore whether existing pedagogical models to widen participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to a formal learning environment.
Chapter 3. Research design

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research design decisions for this EdD study which explores the extent to which approaches to widening participation to HE are effective for adult learners returning to formal learning. The study builds on the evidence that suggests adult learners returning to formal learning do so with anxieties brought about by their previous educational experience (Cross, 1981; Pascall and Cox, 1993; McGivney, 1990; Crossan et al., 2003; Waller, 2006). It goes beyond issues of confidence in academic ability to explore how previous educational experiences impact on learners’ engagement within the formal learning environment. The specific questions the research set out to explore are:

1. How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?
2. How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?

To address these questions, a case study approach was adopted and primary data to support the research questions were collected through qualitative methods in a three-phase process and a final phase of analysis of secondary data:

• Phase 1 – testing the research methods
• Phase 2 – applying revised research methods based on phase 1
• Phase 3 – validation of findings from phases 1 and 2 through additional primary research.
• Phase 4 – validation of findings from phases 1 and 2 through analysis of secondary data

This chapter begins by providing a rationale for the approach, drawing upon ontological and epistemological positioning. These positions offer insight into the choice of research methodology, which reflects the social constructivist theoretical
framework upon which the research is based. The position that I hold at the case study institution enables rich professional insight in relation to embedding policy requirements into practice, alongside an identification of the challenges that many adult learners face when returning to formal learning. There is potential for a personal and professional conflict of interest if the outcomes of the research challenge current approaches (which I assist in devising and enacting) being implemented by the case study institution. As student success is at the core of the University’s strategic objectives, the research seeks to provide evidence to inform recommendations which have the potential to improve the outcomes for students at the case study institution. It aims to influence wider practice across the sector as providers respond to the need to widen participation for adult learners as identified within Access and Participation Plan Guidance (OFS, 2019a).

The chapter presents the methodological framework that was influenced by the theoretical perspectives adopted based on their appropriateness for answering my specific research questions. Literature around case study research will be explored, and a rationale provided for its appropriateness for this doctoral research. A critical examination of the research methodology adopted will be provided. The final section within the methodological framework will discuss my approach to validating the research in order to reflect the viewpoints of others involved in the delivery of HE to adult learners.

Prior to exploring the specific detail of the research methods used to investigate the research questions and the approach to the analysis of the data produced as a result, the ethical considerations needing to be addressed within the research are discussed. It was particularly important to be mindful of ethical issues in carrying out this study, given that the conversations being held with participants were likely to be personal and sensitive in nature. Care was required to avoid any inadvertent negative impact on participants. It was also necessary to be aware of the impact that the sharing of personal and emotive information could have on me as a researcher (Stevenson, 2018).

The research methods section will present the approach taken in terms of how the participants were identified and subsequently recruited to the study in phases 1, 2 and 3. During phase 1, it was recognised that the initial approach being used to
recruit participants was potentially not attracting students who fall within the broad concept of widening participation, particularly those on low incomes and from low HE participation postcodes (a measure identified by the OFS). The alternative approaches that were explored as the research progressed are discussed, and the final choice of using vignettes is explained. This approach grew out of my responses to some of the ethical issues that were identified during the institutional approvals process. It enabled access to students who may otherwise have been the least likely to re-engage in learning as a result of their previous experiences of education.

3.2. Research design

It is important that research has:

*a design or strategy that justifies the logic, structure and the principles of the research methodology and methods and how these relate to the research questions, hypothesis or proposition.*

(Jupp, 2006, p. 265)

The overall research design employed to address the research question ‘*to what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning?’* emerged as a direct result of critical engagement with the literature that was reviewed and discussed in Chapter 2. Adults returning to learning do so for many reasons, and are not always driven by economic needs (Bynner, 2017; Schuller, 2017). They do so with multiple identities, complex histories (Askham, 2008) and decisions made through financial, social and cultural influences (Cross, 1981; HEPI, 2017; Biesta, 2018; OFS, 2020), all of which impact on their experiences. These experiences require alternative approaches to learning for adults from those traditionally adopted for younger pupils. These approaches relate to the need to develop critical reflection skills which enable adult learners to challenge existing assumptions, developed as a result of life experience, and thus experience transformative learning (Freire, 1972; Mezirow, 1991; Jarvis, 2003).

There are five main components to the research design:

- The ontological position
- The theoretical framework/epistemological position
3.3. Ontological position

As can be seen from the literature review, an exploration of adult learners returning to formal learning is full of complex social and individual experiences, positions and behaviours, and so is unlikely to be effectively illuminated through the adoption of a positivist perspective. This perspective takes the position of objectivity, and therefore makes use of empirical methods, testing hypotheses and experimenting to generate measurements and other quantitative data. It was clear from the number of aspects revealed by the literature review and the difficulty of separating and quantifying them that an empirical approach would not be the most effective way of exploring the adult learning experience. Therefore, it was decided to approach the research from a qualitative, interpretative perspective.

This position responds to arguments that suggest human behaviours cannot be divorced from the external factors that influence them. In relation to engagement in learning, these external factors include the influence of family and peers (Rubenson, 1998; Biesta, 2008; Burton, 2011;) and the availability of a network of support (Tuckett and Field, 2016). As Hammersley (2018, p. 1) argues: ‘[the] operationalization of sociological concepts in terms of quantitative indicators squeezes the meaning out of those concepts.’ Therefore, to understand the complexities of adult learners, the research must explore the lives of participants, which can be understood only through the in-depth knowledge gained from their stories.

[T]he goal of qualitative research is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with a detailed study of that situation.

(Schofield, 2014, p.183)
My research explores the transformative benefits of learning that are difficult to quantify, and through conversation enables a deeper understanding of the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning.

3.4. Robustness of qualitative research

Concepts in relation to the validity, reliability and generalisability are often challenged in relation to qualitative research (Noble and Smith, 2015). They are often connected to quantitative research methods and specifically relate to: the accurate reflection of the findings; consistency of procedures and the elimination of bias; and the transferability of findings (Noble and Smith, 2015). The perception that qualitative research is subjective and lacks rigour is often based on a view that validity and reliability of findings cannot be assured (Kvale, 1994). As a result, critics of qualitative research question its worth (Hammersley, 2007).

In responding to this criticism, Noble and Smith (2015) use the concepts of validity, reliability and generalisability to provide alternative measures of rigour for qualitative research. Briefly, these can be thought of as:

- validity – truth value
- reliability – consistency
- generalisability – applicability to other contexts.

Conducting qualitative research which demonstrates rigour in these areas requires the researcher to provide a clear rationale for the research design and methodological framework that reflects the nature of the research questions and justifies the adopted approach. It also relies on transparency of the research process and acknowledgement of the researcher’s position in relation to the research context.

The research presented in this doctoral thesis aims to provide the reader with confidence that both the advantages and disadvantages of adopting particular methodologies and methods were considered, and that the research process was robust and reliable.
3.5. Neutrality in qualitative research

Many arguments relating to the use of quantitative or qualitative research methods suggest that quantitative methods remove subjectivity and value-laden questions for which qualitative methods are criticised. Ercikan and Wolff-Michael (2006), for instance, argue that each approach has elements of the other, and therefore the assumptions made of each should be challenged. They argue that quantitative research is not value neutral, as the very questions asked are imbued with value assumptions. While advocates of qualitative research suggest it offers a richer and more in-depth understanding of phenomena, it is not without its challenges in terms of neutrality. One such challenge is that participants may respond differently on one day compared with another (Ercikan and Wolff-Michael, 2006), and the effect of this may be more pronounced in qualitative research than in quantitative research. Therefore, researchers may decide to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and inductive and deductive approaches, where no predetermined theory is applied to the research process (inductive) or existing hypotheses are tested against the data as they are analysed (deductive).

Qualitative approaches that seek to identify dominant themes may use different proportions of deductive and inductive processes: themes may be decided upon in advance or existing coding schemes may be used. This may, however, reduce the neutrality of qualitative research. Quantitative research methods can also be applied depending on exactly what is being coded. Noting the frequency of words or phrases, or the regularity with which they are used may contribute to determining particular themes within participant stories. Similar coding could be applied to different settings if a study sought to compare responses across several contexts. These strategies could address criticisms around the lack of generalisability of qualitative research. However, this hybrid approach runs the risk of missing important findings that do not fit into the established coding structure (Wang, 2013), and also ignores external factors that position the data within its context. This is particularly important in exploring the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning, given arguments that suggest they are a group of students with diverse backgrounds and experiences (Cross, 1981; Askham, 2008; Butcher, 2015b).
As my research aimed to elicit the student voice within the context of widening participation to HE for adult learners the approach, recognising these characteristics, was to gather insight into participant experiences through in-depth interviews. The identification of themes, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, would involve a combination of reflective and iterative approaches that allowed themes to emerge and ensured they were positioned within the context relevant for participants.

Developing a research design that takes account of context is important to the contribution of the study, as dissemination of its findings will contribute to the body of literature within lifelong learning, adult learning, adult education and widening participation. Colleagues working within the HE sector will need to consider the findings within their own context. Although theories of adult learning have been criticised as being too broad and all-encompassing (Loeng and Omwami, 2018), it is not the aim of this research to provide a definitive approach to adult learning. Rather, it provides insights into how adult learners are supported to return to learning in a certain context. These insights may be applicable in other institutions (at least partially, and within the boundaries of their local context) as they seek to increase their adult learner participation.

3.6. Theoretical framework

The theoretical perspective which has influenced the research design is rooted within social constructivism. Social constructivism assumes the position that individuals make new knowledge by the interactions that they have with others in the world, as opposed to a positivist epistemological position which assumes that there is one way of knowing the world (The Open University, 2014). A social constructivist approach is appropriate for research on a topic which focuses on the multiple identities of adult learners returning to formal learning and their heterogeneity (McGivney, 1990; Stuart and Thomson, 1995; Bamber and Tett, 2000; Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001; Merrill, 2004; Mallman and Lee, 2016). The research provides additional insight into the learning experiences of adult learners through in-depth conversations into their lived experiences, and in this way, contributes to the wider literature on adult learning and widening participation.
Social constructivism is an appropriate framework in an educational environment, recognising that individuals are part of a social network of learning, with each individual translating that learning into new knowledge, based on their own unique, previous experiences (Blondy, 2007). This position acknowledges learners’ heterogeneity and the different experiences they bring to the HE environment, and supports arguments that suggest adult learners are not an homogeneous group (McGivney, 1990; Stuart and Thomson, 1995; Bamber and Tett, 2000; Waller, 2006; Mallman and Lee, 2016) and enter HE with diverse and unique experiences (Askham, 2008). In researching a topic where these complex factors are so integral, it was important to use a framework which facilitated individual narratives and understandings of how individuals interpret their worlds.

3.7. My position as the researcher

Before transforming the theoretical positions discussed above into the concrete, practical steps of a research project, it is important to acknowledge that my personal and professional position cannot be detached from the research process. My professional role at the OU is firmly embedded within the context of widening participation to HE, specifically in relation to adult learners. I come to the research as a supporter of the transformative benefits of learning and with a particular interest in how the case study institution, with its open access policy, opens doors for many adults for whom traditional, face-to-face HE is not possible. My position as a researcher within my professional practice and my identity as a research student, therefore, require a high level of transparency within the research process, not only in terms of engagement with participants but also in terms of how the findings are presented. This is not an unfamiliar position for me, as the academic research undertaken within my professional role is also used to inform practice across the institution. The outcomes of my professional practice provide evidence for change in relation to supporting adult learners returning to a formal learning environment within the context of widening participation.

Clearly, my personal and professional position within the research study make it difficult to be neutral or objective. The unique position I hold within the case study institution in terms of embedding policy into practice also means that there might be a conflict if the outcomes of the research challenge my approach in my professional
activities. My enthusiasm for the research topic could also overpower the perspectives and opinions of the participants. My main consideration was, therefore, to ensure participants felt empowered to present their perspectives, and to avoid leading participants in their responses to my questions. The research methods adopted reflect this and will be outlined in greater detail in this chapter. The research questions were developed as a result of my existing knowledge and experience within my professional practice, in terms of undertaking research and scholarship in relation to widening participation. To ensure rigour and minimise the effect of any possible influence resulting from my position, the findings were further validated through subsequent interviews and focus groups with OU tutors and educational advisors, and a national policymaker. The process by which the research evolved is further evidence of my awareness that my professional and personal position could impact on the research findings.

3.8. Methodological framework

The methodological framework adopted to address the research question ‘to what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning?’ emerges out of my ontological and epistemological positions which reflect a social constructivist paradigm. Positioning my research within this framework has influenced the research design. This section will provide a rationale for the case study methodology decided upon, taking into account the ethical challenges that influenced the research design.

3.8.1. Case study research

A case study approach to the research was adopted that reflected the nature of the issue being explored. While adopting a case study approach does not necessarily mean that the research will be undertaken from a social constructivist perspective, it provides the framework for an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon. Case studies provide a bounded context from which particular issues can be explored (Stake 2005; Yin, 2014). The actual method of research undertaken within a case study can be reflective of quantitative or qualitative paradigms. This is reflected in definitions of what a case study is and what they can reveal.
The social constructivist position within which my research is positioned defines a case study as ‘a specific, complex, functioning thing ... which has a boundary and working parts’ (Stake, 1995, p. 2). This approach aligns closely with the complexities revealed within the literature review around adult learners returning to formal learning and offers the opportunity to draw upon the unique experience of participants without necessarily determining cause and effect, as would be the case within a positivist approach. With my research firmly embedded in the social constructivist definition of a case study, I seek to explore through narrative, students’ previous educational experiences and the impact they have had on the students’ engagement within an HE environment, without claiming a direct causal relationship.

Some criticisms of case study research suggest that findings are not generalisable within other contexts (Tellis, 1997b). Harland (2016) provides a counter-argument to this, suggesting that the existing knowledge of a researcher combines with findings from previous research, developed from the experiences of others (Stenhouse, 1978). The new research adds to this stock of knowledge from which other research develops, producing a cumulative argument. These approaches aim to inform the sector in relation to what has worked in a particular setting, and what has not. The impact of this is that individuals take aspects of what has been learnt into their own setting and apply it accordingly, making allowances as appropriate for the different contexts within which they are operating (Schofield, 2014). Evaluation of subsequent initiatives implemented by the research is then presented through conferences and seminars, and the process continues.

### 3.8.2. The specific case study for this research project

For this research, the case study needed to reflect the context for adult learners returning to learning within a formal distance learning HE environment. Literature relating to adult learning (Mezirow, 1991; Illeris, 2018), adult learners (Jarvis, 2001; Biesta, 2008; McGivney, 1990) and adult education more broadly (Kelly, 1970; Fieldhouse, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; Jarvis, 2001;) helped to identify what was appropriate to include in the scope of the study and what was not. With the understanding developed from the literature review, therefore, the case study focused on:
• adult learners returning to learning
• in a formal learning environment
• having been out of formal education for some time
• with low confidence in academic ability
• perceiving themselves to need study skills development.

The case study identified for this research is the OU, the largest provider of flexible distance learning in the UK. It attracts many students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds, many of whom study part-time alongside other full and part-time work commitments. Most OU students are adult learners, with the average age, in April 2021, being reported as 27.

Figure 4. presents the demographic breakdown of OU students.

![Figure 4. The demographic breakdown of OU student data 2018/19 (Source: OU data 2019).](image)

This demographic breakdown shows that adult learners in the institution present many characteristics of widening participation learners (Butcher, 2015b). Focusing on adult learners also meets some of the broader aspects of widening participation policy in terms of other intersecting characteristics, such as ethnicity and disability.

That being said, the focus of the research is adult learners generally, given that adult learners are grouped as one discrete cohort within Access and Participation Plan Guidance (OFS, 2019b). The guidance does suggest analysis of intersectional data, which was something to be considered if this emerged as a theme from the data.
analysis. It was, however, not the intention for the broad spectrum of widening participation characteristics to be the main focus of the research.

The case study institution offers an introductory Level 4 curriculum which provides the foundations to encourage successful further undergraduate study. The OU also has a bespoke programme at Level 0 (the Access Programme) which is designed to provide a taster of HE-level study specifically, as well as to support progression into HE and to develop confidence which may impact on a student’s desire to return to learning (in whatever form) at a later date (Biesta, 2008). The Access programme is aimed at adult learners who have been out of formal learning for a significant length of time, which is the group of students particularly relevant to the research in this thesis. The curriculum of the programme aligns with arguments relating to the broad values of lifelong learning for its own sake, rather than for specific, goal-oriented reasons (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Students choose one of three cross-disciplinary introductory modules, in Arts, Social Sciences or STEM. These modules are delivered at level 0 and are 30 credits, and fall outside of the Qualification Framework in England (Gov.UK, 2019). Other Access to HE courses are positioned at Level 3. The OU’s Access Programme carries no undergraduate credit or UCAS points and therefore is not designed to be an entry level qualification. While it may have been used to gain entry into traditional face-to-face universities by a minority of students, that is not the main aim of the programme. The programme differs from others within the FE and HE sectors, (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2018; Access to Higher Education, 2021; LearnDirect, 2021; MKCollege, 2021) in that it is specifically designed to overcome the challenges mentioned above, and therefore is particularly relevant to adult learners. Appendix 3 provides more detail on the Access programme.

Students on Access receive regular, one-to-one telephone tuition designed to provide a more personalised relationship with their tutor. Students do not formally engage with each other during the module, although they are able to join informal online forums if they wish. This approach is designed to develop confidence and studentship skills through the building of trust with the student’s personal tutor. The telephone tutoring model is unique to the OU’s Access programme. However, the possible lessons offered by researching this model extend further and may have relevance to
the online learning environment. This has the potential to be an important
collection where online learning environments have become more prevalent due
to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which alternative approaches to
delivering lectures, tutor and pastoral support have had to be designed.

The Access Programme uses the proportion of the higher fee income committed
within the Access and Participation Plan with the OFS to offer Access modules at half
the price of a standard OU module, and also to offer a full fee waiver for eligible
students across the UK. This is intended to remove some of the financial barriers that
may prevent adult learners from engaging in study at HE level, while enabling
personal and professional development. In terms of widening participation to HE for
adult learners, the OU Access Programme is an example of demonstrable impact on
learner confidence (Butcher, et al., 2019), which is known to be one of the main
challenges for adult learners returning to a formal learning environment (McAlister,
1998; Million Plus and NUS, 2012; Goodchild, 2017). The confidence which learners
develop through this course may also help them to engage more fully in wider aspects
of life, demonstrating the broader benefits lifelong learning can bring (Field, 2006).
While the course may be considered ‘low value’ in relation to meeting society’s
economic demands (Department for Education and Skills, 2019), it can be seen as
‘high value’ in terms of its transformative powers.

The particular framework within which the Access model is positioned at the case
study institution provided the rationale for who was and was not included within the
case study. The introductory chapter to this thesis provided the context within which
this thesis is positioned: the widening participation to HE policy landscape and
specifically approaches to widening participation that are aimed at supporting
students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds into HE. The
Access programme is designed to specifically address these requirements. Whilst
there could have been an argument to include students with low previous
educational qualifications who entered directly onto the undergraduate programme,
the research was not an evaluation of Access compared to the undergraduate
programme. The research sought to explore the impact of past experiences of
education on students who deliberately took the decision to undertake a widening
participation initiative (the Access programme) in order to develop confidence which had been eroded as a result of their past experiences of education and as a result of them being out of formal education for some time. Students entering directly at Level 4 were different in not recognising or acknowledging a possible need to build confidence. Including these students would do nothing to address the research questions as whilst they may present similar characteristics to the chosen cohort, they did not embark on the Access programme, which was the particular focus of the research.

It was important to enhance the potential for the case study to have relevance to the wider university sector in terms of providing a greater level of understanding of the needs of adult learners as they return to a formal learning environment. To do this, it was necessary to continually reflect on the aims of the research during the data collection phase so that the attention remained on exploring how previous educational experiences impact on adult learners as they return to a formal learning environment, rather than evaluating the Access programme.

There are various ways of approaching a case study within a qualitative paradigm, and in the context of the research question for this project, it was important to settle on methods which facilitated a deeper understanding of the issues that some adult learners face, based on their previous experiences. My initial idea was to combine quantitative data from a closed-question survey with qualitative data from interviews, a hybrid method described by Merriam (1998) and supported by Yin (2014). This would respond to criticisms that qualitative research lacks rigour. As the project continued, it became clear that additional methods were required to allow participants to ‘tell their stories’ in ways that a more structured and restrictive interviewer/interviewee approach might prevent (Shacklock and Thorp, 2005). The resulting choice of methods is discussed in the sections which follow.

3.9. Research methods

Research methods are the tools used to enable research data to be collected. The particular research methods chosen are influenced by the theoretical positions informing the study. In respect of the qualitative case study, options for methods typically include surveys, interviews, focus groups and observations. As this doctoral
study sought to gather rich data (Wang, 2013), interviews and focus groups initially appeared to be appropriate choices. The complex and diverse lives of adult learners which emerged brought into question whether a traditional interview approach would effectively elicit the student voice and provide detailed insight into the richness of their lives. On consideration, it was decided that a more conversational approach to the interview would be more appropriate, while remaining broadly within the interview-style framework.

3.9.1. Interviewing as a qualitative research method

Interviewing is one of several approaches to data collection used within qualitative research that provides ‘a structure and a purpose within a conversation’ (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p. 5, in Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The position of the researcher as insider or outsider within the research process is important in enabling a rapport to develop between interviewee and interviewer, which Limerick (1996) suggests is particularly important when interviewing strangers. While the development of rapport is essential in enabling participants to feel comfortable in sharing their stories, a level of distance is also required in order that real questions can be asked and explored (Seidman, 2013). This viewpoint relates to issues regarding researcher bias within the research process and suggests the need for a balance that prevents the researcher from becoming too familiar with the participant which may result in a loss of objectivity or reflection. Limerick’s (1996) research revealed the importance of researchers’ abilities to reflect continually on all aspects of the research process. Relations of power between researcher and participants need to be carefully considered, with increasing familiarity impacting upon the likelihood of the balance of power becoming more equal, or potentially shifting to the participant. This has implications for who controls the direction of the interview (Seidman, 2013) which will, in part, be dependent upon the type of interview being conducted; structured interviews are likely to be more researcher-led, whereas unstructured interviews are likely to shift control towards the participant.

Developing a close rapport with participants can also have an emotional impact on researchers and participants (Stevenson, 2018), with the possibility that the researcher takes on the role of counsellor for participants. Many researchers are unlikely to have been trained in how to deal with deeply personal and emotive
stories, and while this may provide the participant with some sense of offloading some of their worries, it could have serious implications for the researcher’s mental health. It was likely that the stories participants would tell in my research would be of a similar nature, and therefore it was important that as the researcher I was prepared for what participants might divulge. Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 130) suggest that it is necessary for researchers to take a non-judgemental, sensitive and respectful stance within the research process. As the researcher, therefore, I had to maintain an approach that ensured the participants’ best interests were at the heart of the conversation.

There has been a growing impetus in the use of narrative inquiry and life history approaches within qualitative research (Floyd, 2012). These approaches are ‘concerned with the production, interpretation and representation of storied accounts of lived experience’ (Shacklock and Thorp, 2005, p. 156). These authors highlight the interrelatedness of life history, narrative and interviewing to qualitative approaches. These ideas are incorporated into the research approach adopted within this doctoral project which used a hybrid method of semi-structured interviews and the flexibility of narrative, which enabled participants to lead and take ownership of the interview process. This method was designed to yield, through conversation, rich student stories and a level of understanding of their past experiences that would produce the most valuable insights into assessing the impact of approaches to widening participation within the case study institution (Wang, 2013).

3.9.2. Interviewing and focus groups

Using focus groups can also be considered as a form of interviewing, albeit within a group setting. Kitzinger (1994) and Barbour (2005) suggest that a focus group enables participants who are not confident in talking in a one-to-one setting to contribute in a non-threatening environment. In the study reported here, this seemed an appropriate approach given that many of the students who were participating were likely to be struggling with issues around confidence in the HE environment, as indicated in the literature review. While issues similar to those mentioned above in relation to one-to-one interviews are still likely to be relevant in the case of focus groups, the control and ownership of the research process is likely to shift towards
the participants as they share their experiences. The researcher role then becomes one of facilitator (Kitzinger, 1994).

While much qualitative research includes face-to-face interviewing, Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) suggest that telephone interviews are as productive as face-to-face interviews. Their view is that telephone interviews may encourage participants to be more open in their responses, as the partial anonymity enables more personal responses (Opdenakker, 2006). The use of non-face-to-face methods of data collection, however, presents particular challenges to researchers in terms of the barriers such collection methods present (Holt, 2010). The main argument is that they may prevent the researcher from developing a rapport with participants. It has been suggested that this can impact upon the participants’ engagement with the interview process (Holt, 2010), and the researcher’s ability to probe deeper into the phenomenon being explored (Novick, 2008). Media platforms such as Skype or Facetime enable video capabilities which may overcome some of the issues that telephone interviewing presents. While barriers may still exist when using these tools in terms of not being physically present, the ability to observe body language and facial expressions may facilitate the research process.

These considerations were all important given my professional position at the OU and how students might perceive me as being part of the formal learning environment within which they are assessed. In addition, using interviews and focus groups presented particular challenges in the specific case study institution because students study at a distance and are geographically dispersed. Approaches to ensure participants were empowered within the interviews and focus groups were incorporated into the research design. These approaches were further informed and refined by the piloting of research tools in Phase 1 of the study.

3.9.3. Research methods in Phase 1 of the study

The following sections will explore the decisions made in relation to the research methods, specifically acknowledging the distance-learning environment.

The research is bounded within the context of OFS requirements which focus upon widening participation for England only, as opposed to other nations within the UK, which the OU serves. OU students are used to interacting with the OU from a
distance, either through telephone, email, or online groups and forums. One-to-one interviews with students reinforce this approach and enable the possibility of their participation in the research in much the same way that OU study affords them the opportunity to study alongside other work and personal commitments. I made clear to students that they were free to arrange the interview at a time that fitted within their existing work, study and personal responsibilities. Consideration was given to the possibility of attendance at a physical location. Face-to-face interviews would be affected by practicalities in identifying suitable locations for interviews given the dispersed nature of the students. Possibilities were: within a student’s home; within an OU regional office (either Manchester, Nottingham, or its main campus in Milton Keynes); or community space, such as a public library. Conducting interviews within the homes of students could place either participant or researcher in a vulnerable position and this option was considered not to be viable. Without knowing where the students were located, it was difficult to identify possible locations in advance, and this would present additional challenges when attempting to arrange a focus group. Interviews or focus groups held outside of students’ homes would also require additional cost and time associated with travel, which was not a burden students should incur and for which financial reimbursement would not be possible. These additional challenges ran the risk of non-attendance.

In order to overcome these issues, I considered one-to-one interviews and focus groups with participants conducted by telephone, Skype or other media platforms. There was potential for the use of more contemporary media platforms to cause barriers for some of the students with whom I wished to engage. I overcame this by asking participants upon initial contact through which medium they preferred their interviews to be conducted. This approach requires the researcher to be familiar with the technology that the participant prefers. I therefore developed an awareness and familiarisation of the different platforms in order to ensure students could use their preferred platform. Providing students with a choice of platforms also helped to overcome the threat of different modes of interviewing yielding different levels of engagement, as students were more likely to engage in an environment within which they feel comfortable. If a particular mode of conducting the interview was pre-defined, this would need to be explicitly foregrounded in reporting of findings.
The students I intended to approach were distance learners and, while they were relatively new to the online learning environment, they were familiar with the distance-learning model of HE, particularly as on the Access Programme they receive tuition via the telephone. Access modules do not include online tutorials although students are able to join module forums or general OU forums if they wish. This might suggest that the participants in my research were less likely to choose an alternative media platform. None the less, all options were made available to students at the point of initial contact.

3.9.4. Interview structure and practical implementation

The interview process in Phase 1 highlighted the sensitive nature of the research, particularly as students had been selected because they had returned to study through the Access programme and there was therefore an assumption that they were ‘lacking confidence’. This affected the type of questions that I was able to ask, which consequently affected the responses. Given that Phase 1 was designed to experiment with different approaches to the structure of the interviews I made some adjustments as the interviews progressed, such as reordering the way the questions were asked and using extracts of the existing OU Widening Access and Success Strategy to act as prompts. The extracts, which were two pages long, were emailed to the participants prior to the interview. Participants were asked to read the extracts before the interview took place. This approach was effective to some extent as it created the opportunity to discuss the issue in a third-person context, equalising the balance of power between researcher and participant (Shacklock and Thorp, 2005; Somekh and Lewin, 2005).

While the process appeared to have benefit, the content of the material potentially restricted the discussion, given that it was high-level and strategic. Upon reflection, the extracts were also too long. This influenced a literature search for alternative methodologies that use artefacts to engage participants in what are often sensitive subjects.

3.9.5. Consideration of other methods for later phases

One approach that I considered was the technique of word association, often used in psychology to stimulate discussion. Nielsen and Ingwersen (1999) suggest that word
association techniques can provide researchers with an insight into the private world of an individual. While their research adopted this technique in its purest form (i.e. participants are given a word and in response they must provide the researcher with the first word that comes to mind), this method was not appropriate for eliciting the rich, in-depth data I required to reveal the experiences of participants. The technique did, however, lend itself to being adapted to frame discussions around some of the language used in institutional and government policies. One possibility was that key words taken from institutional and government policies plus other material such as university web sites, prospectuses and other marketing material, would be presented to students in advance of the interview. The students would then be asked to map them against other key words relating to previous educational experiences and their decision to return to learning. The outputs of this activity would provide the prompts for the main discussion in the interview. Evidence from literature that reports the issues facing adult learners returning to learning (Cross, 1981; Gorard, Rees and Fevre, 1999; Hillage et al., 2000; Gorard and Smith, 2006; Biesta, 2008) could be used to guide the choice of stimulus words.

Consideration was given as to how this could be facilitated at a distance, given the time pressures that many OU students face because of their multiple roles and existing commitments. In the end, it was decided that this was not a feasible option, and another alternative approach was considered: the use of vignettes as a stimulus for discussion. It was thought that these could be built from the initial extracts used for Phase 1 and the interview data from that phase.

3.10. Vignettes

Barter and Renold (1999) describe a vignette as:

\[
\text{a method that can elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations.}
\]

Because I sought to elicit quite sensitive information from participants in relation to exploring their previous experiences of education, along with recollections of their personal histories, this was an appealing tool. Further, Neff (1979) argues that vignettes facilitate the exploration of complex and sensitive issues. This is particularly
relevant to participants in my research given that they were adult learners, recognised as complex (Askham, 2008) and having ‘fragile identities [which are] embedded within their biographies’ (Goodchild, 2017, p. 776). Although Goodchild’s research focuses specifically upon part-time learners, this description is relevant to the study, given that the majority of part-time learners are adult learners (Butcher, 2015b).

In responding to some of the criticisms levelled at qualitative research outlined in previous sections of this chapter, it is useful to note that Stravakou and Lozgka (2018) suggest that the use of vignettes facilitates a shift in power from the researcher to the participant, positioning the researcher as the passive facilitator of a conversation rather than taking on a pivotal role. As a result, the likelihood of researcher bias is reduced (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000), as the participant takes ownership of the conversation. As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, this is particularly important in respect of my research given my professional position and the possibility of my professional and personal opinions influencing the nature of the discussion. However, due to my position as insider-researcher, there is a risk that I could bias the content of the vignettes and therefore influence participant reflections. As presented in the introductory chapter, my insider-researcher position is a strength of the research and has been explicitly recognised. Therefore the vignettes are based on my expertise within the field of widening participation as well as widening participation literature and are to be used as an aid rather than a true account of participant experiences. Section 3.10.1 details of how the vignettes were developed.

Another key argument for the use of vignettes in this study relates to deficit models, which as mentioned in Chapter 2, position adult learners within an ‘othered space’ (Michie, Glachan and Bray, 2001; Mallman and Lee, 2016). Barter and Renold (2000) refer to vignettes being used in quantitative studies, with respondents answering predetermined questions. Sundaram and Wilde (2011) build on this method, suggesting that vignettes help to avoid deficit language. While their research was with a cohort of young people (those with special educational needs), it is relevant in that this group of people are impacted by negative labelling in similar ways that adult learners returning to formal learning are. Sundaram and Wilde’s research uses a series of statements to which pupils are asked to respond, as opposed to direct questions.
While both these studies use vignettes which are slightly different from the ones that I eventually used, they do highlight the flexibility that the use of vignettes can bring (Barter and Renold, 2000).

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the arguments for the use of vignettes are strong, particularly as they may help to overcome some of the ethical dilemmas that my research had to conquer. Stravakou and Lozgka (2018), however, draw attention to some of the issues to be aware of when using vignettes. These relate largely to their structure, and it is suggested that researchers should be conscious of their length and the level of detail they contain. Vignettes that are too long or too detailed become time-consuming, as participants try to make sense of and reflect on their content. This was a vital consideration for my research given that many OU students are time-poor as a result of their competing commitments (Boughey in Smit, 2012). Conversely, Stravakou and Lozgka argue that vignettes which are not detailed enough may reduce participants’ ability to identify with the content. They also argue that the language used needs to reflect both the context within which the research is set and also the particular contexts of the participants.

**3.10.1. Developing the vignettes**

The vignettes illustrated scenarios which were developed primarily from the findings emerging from Phase 1 of the research, perspectives of adult learner having had poor experiences of education (Crossan et. al., 2003; Merrill, 2007), and my own professional knowledge of adult learners and widening participation. In order to respond to some of the criticisms of the use of vignettes identified above, a draft of the three vignettes was sent to three critical readers who were not involved in HE. This neutrality was important in order to ensure that the language being used was suitable for someone outside of the context of academia and that the story being told made sense. The readers were asked to comment on:

- length
- language
- cohesion
- detail.
In general, the feedback was that the vignettes were easy to understand, and about the right length and tone. One reader commented that they were text heavy and would benefit from being split into separate paragraphs. The vignettes were further piloted with two colleagues within the OU. The aim of this was to test the vignettes alongside the interview schedule that would be used with the participants. These pilots were invaluable in ensuring that from the start the interviews would be conducted as effectively as possible. Feedback from colleagues in relation to the vignettes was that they were easy to understand, and the right length and tone. One suggestion was that the mention of particular ages should be removed from the vignettes as in some cases this might influence participants’ identification with them. The vignettes were amended accordingly.

### 3.11. Triangulation

*The term triangulation refers to the practice of using multiple sources of data or multiple approaches to analysing data to enhance the credibility of a research study.*

(Salkind, 2010, p. 1539)

Triangulation offers the potential to bring new findings to the research, and to add richness and depth. While the use of triangulation techniques does not necessarily equate to validating the research, it offers a more balanced perspective from which informed recommendations can be made.

Denzin (1978) and Patton (2002) offer four aspects of research which benefit from triangulation: the data source, investigator, theory and methodology. With this in mind, triangulation in this study was undertaken as outlined below.

**Data sources** – rich stories from participants were elicited through Phases 1 and 2 of the research. Phase 1 also tested whether the student sample could provide data that would respond appropriately to the research questions. Analysis of secondary data sources held by the case study institution was used to provide validation of the findings emerging from the primary research. Bowen (2009) identifies some advantages and limitations of document analysis. He suggests that it is an efficient and cost-effective method of data selection (rather than data collection) as it uses
data that already exists. However, the approach may be limited if the level of detail in existing data sources is not sufficient to relate to the findings emerging from the primary research. Documents may be easily available, as they are often public documents. However, in case study research some documents may not be in the public domain. This presents a challenge for researchers, as the commercial sensitivities of the data may mean that it cannot be used. It should be borne in mind that the documents themselves can also reflect biases, particularly with regard to the purpose of the document, its audience and author. As a researcher I needed to be mindful of this when interpreting the findings from document analysis.

**Investigator** – piloting the research methods with colleagues and critical readers not directly involved in HE or widening participation and the institutional ethical approvals process, sought to eliminate researcher bias and address issues of the balance of power between researcher and participant. It also aimed to ensure that the language used with participants was inclusive and avoided deficit models. Secondary data also had a role to play here as Bowen (2009) suggests, secondary document analysis removes the potential for reactivity to the environment within which primary research is undertaken. This is particularly relevant to how participants react to the researcher, the context of the research and the environment within which the research is undertaken.

**Theory** – validation of the theory informing this research has been addressed through interviews with other stakeholders, including a policymaker, OU tutors and educational advisers.

**Methods** – the use of a pilot phase provided a platform from which to evaluate the chosen methods. This was accompanied by an open, flexible mindset which allowed for evolution of the research methods during the data collection process.

Triangulation played a particularly important role in this research given that student experience of HE involves engagement with different components of the HE institution, such as tutors, and support services. The data gathering process was therefore not restricted to students but included interviews and group discussions with other stakeholders with whom students have a relationship in some capacity. The additional stakeholder discussions were with OU educational advisers and OU
tutors. Given the research is also positioned within a policy context, to provide a richer picture, a policymaker voice was also deemed to be of benefit to the research.

The combination of all the above sources provided rich data to analyse. The analysis of the findings emerging from the one-to-one interviews with participants in Phases 1 and 2 is presented in Chapter 4. The findings of the interviews with tutors, other students and a policymaker, and the analysis of the secondary sources of data are integrated into the analysis. The approach provides ‘a confluence of evidences that breeds credibility’ (Eisner, 1991, p. 110) and one which challenges the criticism of studies which have one single method or source, or may be subject to investigator bias (Bowen, 2009).

3.11.1. Interviews with tutors

OU tutors are one of the most important points of contact for students in a distance-education context, and therefore my research design included one-to-one interviews with two tutors, identified through their formal line managers as likely to be willing to participate in my research. Their perspectives were considered useful, not only in terms of their own experiences of supporting students, but also in terms of exploring the themes that emerged from the analysis of interview data in Phases 1 and 2. The data that emerged would be useful in validating the experiences that participants gave and provide either a complementary or alternative perspective from which to view the data.

3.11.2. Focus group with educational advisers

Alongside tutors, educational advisers are another main point of contact for students across the student journey. Educational advisers on the Access programme are located remotely in Manchester. They provide information, advice and guidance to new and continuing students through a form of triage system. It was, therefore, important that my research reflected their perspectives, and compared them to those of the students.

3.11.3. Interview with a national policymaker

The background and literature review in Chapters 1 and 2 positioned my research within the policy context, and I was therefore keen to include the voice of a policymaker within the research in order to gain richer insight into the arguments
around the purpose of widening participation policy and adult learners within that context. As was the benefit in interviewing tutors for this thesis, the data that emerged from the interview with the national policymaker would help to validate the participant recollections either supporting their experiences or providing an alternative perspective.

3.12. Chapter summary

This chapter has presented the research design decisions made to address the main research question ‘to what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning’, and its subset of questions:

1. How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?

2. How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?

Framed within my ontological and epistemological positions of interpretivism and social constructivism, the research design adopts qualitative methods to enable rich participant accounts of their previous and current experiences. Research design decisions were based on a recognition of the sensitivities that these recollections may provoke as well as affording the most appropriate approach to address the research questions being asked.
Chapter 4. Data collection and analysis

4.1. Introduction

This research aims to address the question and sub-questions asking to what extent do approaches to widening participation effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning.

The research design process identified three phases for the study:

- Phase 1 – testing the research methods
- Phase 2 – applying revised research methods based on phase 1
- Phase 3 – validation of findings from phases 1 and 2 through additional primary research.
- Phase 4 – validation of findings from phases 1 and 2 through analysis of secondary data

As acknowledged in Chapter 1, Section 1.5 my insider knowledge has influenced the data collection and analysis within this thesis, enabling me to focus on specific elements of the data in order to address the issues that I know, from my professional role within the case study, are particularly pertinent to the student experience. As a result the recommendations made from the data analysis are based on the broader knowledge and expertise that I possess within the context of widening participation. These recommendations are presented in Chapter 7.

While Chapter 3 presented the broad research design decisions, Chapter 4 focuses on decisions and approaches in relation to data collection and analysis across these three phases within the ethical framework as set out in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (BERA, 2018).

4.2. Ethics

The overarching aim BERA’s guidelines is to ensure ethical respect is given for:

- the person
- knowledge

95
• democratic values
• the quality of educational research
• academic freedom.

Any research with students at the OU must also be approved through the institution’s Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) and the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). These two groups ensure that those wanting to conduct research do so within University guidelines, and that students are not overburdened with requests to participate in research. Ethics approval to conduct my research was sought from these two groups. The approvals process covered the first two phases. While the two approval groups are separate, decisions are generally made collectively. Therefore, if the HREC have concerns over a research proposal, the SRPP will not approve it, and vice versa. This is relevant to my research, as during the approvals process, the panels made contrasting recommendations. The ethical dilemma they highlighted was pivotal to the general focus of the research which is exploring sensitive topics around past educational experiences for adult learners as they return to a formal learning environment.

Prior to the submission of applications to the HREC and SRPP, conversations had taken place between me and a member of the SRPP to address any potential issues that might arise. The discussion focused upon whether I should be explicit in the invitation to participants as to why they were being invited to participate. BERA guidelines suggest that researchers should be explicit and transparent within the research process. Given that the students were being invited to participate in the research as a result of undertaking an Access module prior to the first year of a degree, their identity as a widening participation student might be assumed. This is the view that the HREC took, and the committee therefore felt that it should be made explicit to participants that they were being considered as widening participation students in a policy context. The SRPP, however, felt that this may have a negative impact on the students, who may not have considered themselves in this way. These very considerations were central to the research questions, but they proved to be barriers to the research process.

Several discussions between the SRPP and HREC resulted in a compromise position whereby the language within the email invitation was amended slightly, to reflect a
more neutral position. This process impacted upon the approaches within the initial phase which, while gathering rich data from participants also sought to test some of the research methods and interview questions. It also provided forewarning of issues that would come to influence the research design in the second phase of data collection.

Upon accepting the invitation to participate in the study, participants were contacted by email with further details about the interview process. This involved them signing a consent form which detailed the purpose of the research, what they could expect from the research process, and how their data would be used, stored and destroyed once the research was complete (Appendix 5). By signing and returning the form, participants gave permission for the inclusion of their anonymised data within the thesis. As part of the institutional approvals process, the OU’s Data Protection team also have sight of the application and advise on its compliance with data protection regulations. The research was undertaken prior to the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) but the process followed complied with data protection regulations current at the time.

4.3. Piloting and phase 1

[Chenail, 2011, p. 257]

The data collection for the research began in November 2017. It was divided into two phases. In addition to gaining insight into the rich experiences of students, the early interviews within the first phase of the data collection period were also designed to pilot some of the research methods being considered for Phase 2 of the project. Phase 1 provided some invaluable learning which was embedded within the data collection during Phase 2. This learning related particularly to the sample and the approach to interviewing.
4.3.1. **Sample criteria**

The OU’s Student Statistics Survey team (SSST) supports researchers and academics in identifying sample groups of students to participate in research. This process protects students from being burdened with participating in too many studies, as well as ensuring that those who have opted out of such activity upon registering with the University are not asked to participate. The sample group requested from the SSST reflected the research focus on adult learners returning to formal learning following a significant period of time out of formal learning, and used the following criteria:

- studied an OU Access module prior to the first year of their degree
- have low previous educational qualifications (fewer than two A levels).

A focus on students who had entered via the Access programme acted as a proxy for students being out of formal education for some time, as it was less likely (although not impossible) that these students would have registered on the Access programme if they had only recently participated in formal learning.

4.3.2. **Recruitment**

The sample list provided by SSST contained 553 eligible students. To avoid gathering too many willing participants who could not all be interviewed within the timeframe, a staged approach was taken to inviting students from the list to participate (see Table 4). A participant information leaflet was included in the email, which provided further information on the purpose of the research (see Appendix 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of invitation</th>
<th>Numbers emailed</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.1.17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1.17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.1.17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.1.17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.17</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4. Response to initial invitation email.*
Initially, 20 students were invited at a time. It was expected that responses might be slow due to competing demands on OU students’ time. Subsequent email calls resulted in a total of 12 students agreeing to participate. Students were given the option of participating in either a one-to-one interview or a focus group. Only one student was interested in participating in a focus group. One-to-one interviews were therefore carried out with all 12 students. All participants opted for telephone interviews. Pseudonyms were used in the data analysis and reported findings to protect participant anonymity.

Upon reflection, it was recognised that the sampling process for this phase had not followed a sufficiently robust approach. Literature on sampling techniques suggests that random sampling provides each individual with an equal opportunity of being selected and eliminates research bias (Olsen, 2014). The approach for this phase did not offer this, as students were systematically selected from the top of the list. The likelihood of students who were at the end of the list being selected decreased as students agreed to participate. In this respect, the sampling process was not random. It was important to ensure that participants had an equal chance of being selected for interview. This realisation influenced the subsequent selection process and requests for participation.

4.3.3. Conducting the interviews
As discussed in Chapter 3 (p.82), semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with participants on a one-to-one basis, carried out with participants at a time convenient to them. Appendix 7 presents the interview schedule used within the pilot study.

4.4. Phase 2
The methodological framework for the research remained unchanged from that at the outset. The lessons learnt from phase 1, however, influenced aspects of phase 2. These included:

- sampling criteria
- recruitment of participants
- interview technique.
4.4.1. Sampling criteria for one-to-one interviews

The findings from phase 1 provided rich insights into the past educational experiences of a handful of OU students. I was particularly interested in whether greater insights could be gained from other student experiences by using different selection criteria, particularly in relation to measures of educational disadvantage, aligned with Access and Participation Plan priorities. POLAR is a measure of the likelihood of participation in HE within a given postcode and used as a measure of access to HE by the OFS. The measure is divided into quintiles, with 1 being the least likely to participate and 5 being the most likely. While POLAR was not a criterion in phase 1, the demographic data of participants revealed that participants fell into quintiles 3, 4 or 5. I was therefore keen to focus phase 2 on students from the lowest POLAR quintiles with a view to exploring any difference in their experiences. There have been several iterations of the POLAR dataset. The sample was based on POLAR3, the dataset available at the time of the research.

This measure of participation was based upon policy focus at the time, set by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (the predecessor to the OFS). The OFS introduced the use of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) with Access and Participation Plan (APP) Guidance, which aligned with the measure used in other UK nations. Although the OU now includes IMD and POLAR in its APP, my research was undertaken prior to this shift in emphasis, and therefore IMD was not included within the sampling criteria. Postcode-based measures are, in general, not without their critics. For adults, the Adults in HE (AHE) measure is a sub-set of POLAR3 and relates specifically to the number of adults who have an HE qualification within a particular postcode. These measures, while adopted by the OFS as indicators of participation, are narrow in their focus. The IMD, while still focused upon postcodes, offers a wider set of variables to measure disadvantage and which are likely to be contributory factors to participation. In England, variables include:

- income deprivation
- employment deprivation
- education, skills and training deprivation
- health deprivation and disability
- crime
• barriers to housing and services
• living environment deprivation.

While multiple characteristics are likely to present a more realistic perspective of a particular area than the narrower focused POLAR3 measure, there is a question in relation to whether they truly reflect the characteristics of students who were the focus of my research.

It also became apparent that the issues revealed by those participants who had not been out of formal education for very long were quite different from those with many years out of formal education. I therefore adapted the criteria for phase 2 to students aged between 25 and 60.

As a result, the sample for phase 2, while remaining focused on students who, having completed an Access module, were studying the first year of their degree, also included students based on revised criteria:

• low previous educational qualifications (less than 2 A levels)
• POLAR3 quintiles 1 and 2
• aged between 25 and 59
• studied an Access module prior to the first year of their degree
• in receipt of a full fee waiver on Access.

The fee waiver on Access is particularly relevant here as eligibility is based on having a household income of less than £25,000 and no previous experience of HE. It therefore acts as a proxy for financial disadvantage within this research.

Increasing the selection criteria resulted in a much narrower sample list from the SSST than in the first phase of the study (n=133). This approach did not seek to target specific groups within the cohort, for example ethnicity or disability. It was anticipated that the broad sampling criteria would enable reaching out to a diverse range of students, and that willingness to participate would be based on individual choice, resulting in a level of self-selection. Having diversity within the sample would provide richer insight into the experiences of students from different backgrounds, although the sample list based on the wider selection criteria was already small. Targeting specific groups within the sample was not likely to have generated the
participant numbers required, an issue also evident in quantitative studies, whereby small numbers result in findings that are not statistically significant.

4.4.2. Selection of participants

Having established the potential student sample, the selection criteria for inviting students to participate in the research was further developed in response to the reflection discussed above, that the original participant selection process was potentially biased.

There are more females (62%) studying with the OU than males (38%). The sample list was, therefore, further disaggregated by gender in order to facilitate the inclusion of a more proportionate split of male and female participants. While this would not provide any guarantee that a proportionate number of male and female students would agree to participate, it increased the likelihood. The resulting sample list included:

Male = 40
Female = 93
Total = 133.

Given that the size of the female sample was over double that of the male, a decision was made to make the number of females more akin to the number of males. A filter was applied to the female sample, selected by odd or even numbers, depending on the position that the students fell within the Excel spreadsheet (see Table 5).

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (odd)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (even)</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Phase 2 sample split

Having identified the three sub-groups of the overall sample list, a stratified sampling process was applied. This enabled equal opportunity of selection, without the influence of researcher bias on the selection process.
Each sub-group was divided by the number of students I intended to contact. This provided a rationale for selecting students based on their position within the overall sub-sample. The results of the stratified random sampling are shown in Table 6

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40/20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>This meant that every other male student within the sub-sample would be contacted initially.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (odd)</td>
<td>47/20</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>See below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (even)</td>
<td>46/20</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>See below.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6. Stratified random sampling.*

### 4.4.3. Recruitment of participants

It was intended that a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 15 students would be interviewed. In a study of 60 in-depth interviews, Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) suggest that saturation (i.e. the point at which no new themes were emerging) occurred at 12 interviews, questioning why they continued to analyse all of the remaining 48. Experiences of researchers presented in Baker (2012) indicate no definitive optimal number of interviews where saturation occurs, with one research study suggesting 70 and another 23. It appears that the saturation point is specific to each individual research project. Acknowledging this, contingencies were planned should my research require further participants to be invited, over and above the 15 I initially aimed to recruit. This would pose a problem if all of the sample had been invited to participate and the number of required participants was not met. In such an event an extension to the sample would be required, possibly including students falling into POLAR3 quintile 3 or extending beyond those students in receipt of the full fee waiver.

An email invitation was sent along with a participant information leaflet (Appendix 8) to all male students within the sample and all ‘odd’ female students initially. This resulted in nine student responses, four males and five females. A second email was sent three days later to the ‘even’ female sample which resulted in an additional six participants being offering the opportunity to be part of the study. In total, 15 students accepted the invitation to participate which meant there was no need to expand the sample further at this point.
As with phase 1, students were emailed consent forms (Appendix 5). The forms provided further detail of the purpose of the research, what participants could expect of the research process, their right to withdraw and how their data would be stored, used and subsequently destroyed. The richness of the stories that participants told in phase 1, meant that the original semi-structured interview-style approach had evolved into a more conversational approach, which better reflected the narrative enquiry originally anticipated. Hence, for phase 2, the questions contained within the original interview schedule were used as prompts rather than direct questions. However, as the nature of the conversations did not differ from the original intention, the same consent form was used.

4.4.4. Interviewing

During the post-selection email exchanges, agreement regarding the date and time of interviews was sought. Students were happy to be contacted by telephone, and flexibility in terms of dates and times ensured that interview times aligned with the individual circumstances of each student. As a result, interviews were arranged during the day, evening and weekends. During this process, students were also sent the three vignettes that had been developed from the outcomes of phase 1 and the literature as described in the previous chapter. The scenarios within the vignettes focused on the experiences of participants within three main themes:

- compulsory education
- post-compulsory education
- the workplace
- home-life.

4.4.5. Participant interviews

Prior to the interview, participants were asked to choose the vignette which resonated most with their own experiences. The interview then focused discussion on the vignette using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 9).

The following two pages present the vignettes that were sent to participants.
The vignettes sent to participants prior to each interview

Student A
Student A works full-time as a checkout assistant in the local supermarket. Both parents work in low skilled occupations and neither of them studied beyond compulsory education. Student A always felt there was an expectation that they would follow the same pathway. Although they started school quite keen they felt that the teachers were never really bothered about teaching them. Student A perceived the other pupils in their year to be more academic than them and it seemed to Student A that they received a lot more support in order that they could achieve higher grades, go on to do A level and possibly university. Everybody in the class knew who the clever ones were which didn’t help Student A’s confidence in their own ability, especially when they were pulled out of lessons to receive extra support. Group activities made Student A particularly anxious either reading out loud to the class or telling everyone what scores they got in a maths test. As a result Student A always felt that they weren’t academic or clever enough at school and so there was not even a thought of staying on beyond O Level/GSCEs. They left with one O Level/GSCE in Drama and went to work in a local supermarket where they have worked ever since. Whilst there appeared to be opportunities within the organisation, Student A was never approached to participate in further development and, through lack of confidence in their own academic ability and self-esteem continued in that role. It was only when their own children started school that Student A felt they could do more to support them through their education but the negative experience of their previous education was causing a barrier for them to make their first step back into education.


**Student B**

Student B had quite a positive experience of school and got quite good grades at GCSE/O level. However despite desperately wanting to go to university when they were 18, circumstances at the time meant that it wasn’t possible and they did not progress to post-compulsory education. So they set about a career in marketing and have done quite well for themselves. Despite this, their self-confidence was continually being knocked at work by colleagues who believed that only credible decisions could be made by those who had a degree or equivalent qualification. This made Student B feel inferior within the organisation particularly when senior colleagues went to others for advice rather than the student, despite having the same knowledge and experience. This also happened in meetings when their opinion was disregarded, or not taken seriously over others. This behaviour took its toll on Student B in terms of their self-confidence and their own ability to make decisions and act independently. This was not only played out in the workplace but it began to affect their personal life too as others seemed to present themselves more confidently in all aspects of their lives. Student B began to think about doing some formal education in order to be on an equal footing with colleagues and friends but their confidence had been knocked quite badly that they weren’t even sure that they had to ability to study again.

**Student C**

Student C was brought up in a very negative environment at home and at school. Their parents never encouraged them in anything they did and they were pretty much left to their own devices in all aspects of their life. Their school experience wasn’t much better, they felt neglected by their teachers and didn’t really have many friends. This played out in how they felt about themselves compared to their peers and their confidence was really low personally, academically and socially. Student C picked up on some of the news items that were being reported about people from certain backgrounds in society not doing as well as others and causing problems socially. They could identify themselves within this grouping which further reinforced the negative feelings that they had about themselves and how others in society saw them, particularly as they came from one of the most deprived areas in their town. Student C did odd jobs for work and didn’t really think about what the future might hold for them although there was a deep down feeling that there was something better out there but they did not have the knowledge, insight or confidence in themselves to do anything about it.
The decision to use a semi-structured interview was to enable an exploration of the research topic within a consistent format across interviews. This approach allowed the conversation to diverge as necessary, with the participant having a certain degree of freedom to influence the direction of conversation (Somekh and Lewin, 2005).

The interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes and were recorded through a recording device connected to the telephone handset. Initial transcription was undertaken by me before enlisting the help of a professional transcriber. The full complement of interviews resulted in 248 pages of transcript. Chapter 5 provides a discussion in relation to the analysis of the interview data.

4.5. Phase 3

4.5.1. Focus group discussions

Initially, focus groups were to be formed from the response to the email invitation asking for students to participate in the research. The challenge was that the students with whom I wished to engage were studying at a distance and while it is relatively easy to schedule time to conduct one-to-one interviews, co-ordinating diaries across a group of five or six participants who are likely to have other commitments such as work and family, was more challenging.

I felt it important for students to engage in group discussions in order to build upon some of the emerging findings from the interviews but also to bring to light some of the knowledge and attitudes which are not always easy to elicit in one-to-one interviews (Kitzinger, 1994), whether these be online or face to face. However, following the initial email invitation, only one student indicated an interest in participating in a focus group.

While most students studying with the OU do so at a distance, students are occasionally invited onto campus to participate in various events, consultations and discussions. It was through this mechanism that students were sought to engage with my research in a group environment. Through my professional role at the OU, I was involved in a meeting with the Director of Fair Access and Participation at the OFS and I explored the possibility of talking to a group of students as part of that discussion. As a result, I was afforded the opportunity to have a short, informal discussion with students who were currently, or who had recently undertaken an
Access module and had been invited to campus to share their experiences of the OU with the Director. While this approach did not yield a robust sample, it did provide an opportunistic sample of students who reflected the characteristics upon which my thesis is based, for example low previous educational qualifications and on low incomes. It enabled the exploration of some of my research questions with a collective group of students, which would not have been possible through other, more formal methods.

Participants were asked to provide consent at the beginning of the group discussion, which was recorded via a dictaphone machine, placed within the centre of the table. One student did not want any images or visual recording of her being made public within the research. The recording was transcribed by a professional transcriber and resulted in 14 pages of material. Reassurance was given that only the transcript of the conversation would be used for analysis, as a way of validating the findings emerging from phases 1 and 2 of the study and that the findings would be aggregated to avoid individuals being identified.

4.5.2. Interviews with tutors

To triangulate the data from student interviews, OU tutors (part-time teaching staff working from home) who had tutored on Access and also on other undergraduate programmes were considered for interview. Because the primary aim of the research was to explore the extent to which approaches to widening participation to HE meets the needs of adult learners returning to a formal learning environment, it focuses on students’ previous experiences of education and the impact this has on their experience as they re-engage. Therefore, for the triangulation interviews, the same robust selection process as for the student sample was not required. Selection of tutors to participate in the research was undertaken with the assistance of the Senior Manager within the Access Student Support Team. The criteria for selection were based primarily on a first-come, first-served basis, and on the availability of the tutor. Two tutors were selected and participated in interviews - pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity. Tutor Phil participated in a face-to-face interview, and tutor Nicole participated in a telephone interview. Consent for recording was obtained at the beginning of each interview, alongside provision of background, a rationale for the research and the context within which they were participating. The interviews
were 35 and 50 minutes respectively and were recorded and transcribed. Evidence from a conversation with a tutor (Tutor Rachel) who tutored on an undergraduate module only is also included as triangulation of the findings.

The conversations were informal and unstructured, building on the themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews during phases 1 and 2. These focused on:

- issues of confidence on both Access and Level 4
- the role of the tutor, particularly in relation to identifying students who may require more support
- the tutor/student relationship
- engagement with tutorials and forums
- assessment feedback.

4.5.3. Focus group with educational advisers

Student Support Teams at the OU are located in Milton Keynes, Nottingham and Manchester (as well as dedicated teams within each of the devolved nations of the UK). Educational advisers for the Access programme are located in the OU’s Manchester office and were invited to participate in a focus group through an email invitation request sent from me to their line managers. While my role is based in Milton Keynes and is not directly related to the student support team, I was conscious of the relationship between our roles and the potential concerns of colleagues about what they might wish to divulge. At the very beginning of the discussion, colleagues were assured of the confidentiality of the research and that their comments would remain anonymous. They were also provided with the context of the research, particularly emphasising its aim to improve the experiences of students rather than any criticism of the support that they provide. Five colleagues subsequently attended the focus group meeting, which was held in Manchester with a Skype call link to me in the Milton Keynes office. The interview was recorded through a recording device attached the handset of the telephone. Consent for the recording was obtained at the start of the discussion which lasted for 1 hour and 53 minutes which when transcribed by the professional transcriber, resulted in 53 pages of transcript.
The discussion was semi-structured to ensure that the conversation remained focused on the issues relevant to the study, rather than on other general support issues. The topics for discussion focused on:

- identification of student needs
- support for students and signposting to resources
- the advisors’ approach in terms of the conversations held with students
- the types of issues presented to advisors by students and their responses.

These broad themes were developed with a view to understanding whether the issues that were identified from the analysis of the phase 1 and 2 interviews were visible from the educational advisor perspective. They were also designed to elicit the advisors’ own individual thoughts and perspectives in addition to the institutional approach to supporting adult learners.

4.5.4. Interview with a policymaker

As my research focus was on policy as well as practice it was important to gain insight in relation to the former within the context of widening participation. During the period of my research, Professor Ebdon was the Director of Fair Access to HE at the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and agreed to be interviewed as part of my EdD. The interview took place at a date and time convenient to Professor Ebdon and was held at the OFFA offices in London. As Professor Ebdon was not a student with the OU, ethical consent was not formalised through the OU. Consent to the recording of the interview was sought and recorded on tape. Agreement to use any of the content was given with the caveat that anything attributed to him publicly should be cleared through his office. The interview resulted in 23 pages of transcript which was used to validate the findings that were emerging from the interviews in phases 1 and 2.

4.6. Analysing the interview data

There are a number of possible options for analysing qualitative data, such as content analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis and discourse analysis (Given, 2008). In accordance with the philosophical underpinnings of this study, thematic analysis was an appropriate method because it enabled an exploration of the individual student experience with a view to identifying common themes emerging across the interviews.
Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data.  

(Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297)

An inductive approach (Patton, 2002 in Braun and Clarke, 2006) was adopted from the outset as per Braun and Clarke’s six-phase step-by-step guide to thematic analysis. Inductive approaches to qualitative research involve a researcher collecting relevant data from which theories, concepts and models can be derived (Thomas, 2003). As noted in the previous chapter, a deductive approach would have begun with a hypothesis or statement, which had been initially derived from theory which I would then have aimed to prove or disprove (Ritchie et al., 2014). Such a hypothesis might have been ‘previous educational experiences impact on how adult learners engage within a formal learning environment’. However, my research sought to gain insights into the impact that previous educational experiences have on adult learners as they re-engage in formal learning environments. This called for a more reflective, inductive approach.

An inductive approach could be challenging for my research given that it relies on a process of developing themes which are not influenced by the researcher’s preconceptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As previously acknowledged, my professional role within the case study institution cannot be ignored but places me in a position of influence as I embed policy recommendations within practice. In this respect, my position as a researcher is not to defend the University’s provision but to better understand student experiences and from there to implement evidence-based change. Analysing the interview data from this perspective was seen as positive because I was not only able to identify the themes that were emerging that reinforced some of my existing perceptions based on internal evidence but was also introduced to different and alternative perspectives through the lens of previous educational experience and disadvantage.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest that the analysis phase is exciting as new themes emerge and are discovered. In contrast, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that researchers play an active role in the data analysis process and make judgements as
to what is interesting and of importance to report. There appear to be no hard and fast rules when it comes to thematic analysis, but responses to criticisms over validity and reliability do suggest that a relatively structured approach is desirable.

The challenge in analysing the data collected for this study was to look beyond what I already know as a result of my professional practice. This required a degree of both inductive and deductive thinking that built on the expertise that has been developed to date while being open-minded to the stories that students were telling. Alain et al. (2018) refer to a hybrid approach, applying both inductive and deductive data analysis methods. My research, with explicit recognition of my position at the OU, followed this approach. My professional role as a researcher helped me to frame the research to enable an open-minded and honest analysis of the data. This meant that the themes that emerged were explored further within the data set, validated through conversations with colleagues and external stakeholders at conferences and seminars.

4.6.1. Analysis tools

Many tools for analysing qualitative research data are available to researchers:

- paper-based techniques, such as using highlighters to code themes
- software, such as word-processing packages, spreadsheets and presentation programmes, to organise themes
- more advanced software packages specifically designed for this task, such as NVivo, ATLAS and Provalis.

For this study, the analysis of interview data was facilitated by the use of computer-aided qualitative data software (CAQDAS) in the form of NVivo. This section will explore the use of CAQDAS, addressing its benefits and limitations through a review of the literature to which it relates.

While the process for the analysis of the data may be similar using manual or computer-based tools, criticisms of using CAQDAS relate to the perceived belief that the software will be able to carry out detailed analysis and interpretation of the data without any researcher input (Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge, 2004; Hutchison, Johnston and Breckon, 2010). My decision to use this software was made purely to facilitate the data analysis process in terms of keeping track and collating common
themes across the interviews. I acknowledge the limitations of the software, and do not believe that it can replace the role of the researcher to explore, interpret and reflect upon the themes that evolve within the data (Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge 2004) but it facilitates the process of analysing data within large text-based datasets (Morris and Ecclesfield, 2011). The context within which students tell their stories is essential to understanding their experiences, and while NVivo can help to manage the recording of themes, there is a need for continual reflection on participant stories.

Garcia-Horta and Guerra-Ramos (2009) suggest that the use of CAQDAS can help to overcome some of the issues relating to researcher bias and preconceptions which is particularly important in the context of my research, given my professional role within the case study institution. The approach they suggest can enable more robust and reliable findings, combating a criticism of qualitative research addressed earlier. The research projects used by Garcia-Horta and Guerra-Ramos (2009) to illustrate their points adopt a grounded theory approach and support this argument in terms of the need to produce replicable findings, a point made by positivist researchers and identified by Yin (1981) and Stake (2005) in their different approaches to case study research. While their view is worth recognition, upon reflection on my own research project, the use of NVIVO had an additional possible benefit in creating a level of detachment from the participants and the context within which they live, a view supported by Weitzman (2000). In the context of a life history approach, this is vital to understanding the unique experiences of participants. While NVIVO has enabled themes to emerge from across each of the interviews, the heterogeneity of the participants must be reflected in any findings. Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge’s (2004) paper offers a position on the use of CAQDAS that reflects the rationale for its use in my research, and is also supported by Garcia-Horta and Guerra-Ramos (2009). This relates to its use in overcoming the challenges of working with large amounts of text. Robson and McCartan (2016) refer to the deficiencies of humans as analysts and discuss how CADQAS can support them, helping to remove the human element from the research. However, while CADQAS might meet the needs of research for specific purposes, such as word patterns and frequency of use, it does not facilitate the exploration of individuals’ experiences. Therefore, a combination of thematic coding
and consideration of the wider contextual data relating to the students’ experience was required.

4.6.2. Analysis process

The interview schedules used during phases 1 and 2 of the research are attached as Appendix 7 and Appendix 9. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. In total, the interviews produced 415 pages of transcript. The software met my expectations to some extent, but it was still necessary to adopt an iterative process, constantly referring to full transcripts to put the research within context.

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017) in order to allow the authentic adult voice to speak without the influence of predetermined themes. The approach adopted to analysing the data in both phases of the research was to work methodically through each interview, following a similar approach to that described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Although my professional experience meant that I approached the research with some pre-conceived ideas about the themes that might arise, my approach to the analysis of the interview data was to read each interview independently and label each statement. This would then contribute to the development of themes as the research progressed. As more interviews were analysed, themes were either expanded or new themes were created. Each theme was entered as a node within the software. As I progressed through each transcript, sub-themes emerged in addition to potential relationships between themes. While some sub-themes were identified within this initial coding structure, there were overlaps within these sub-themes that were relevant across more than one theme. For instance, support was mentioned when respondents spoke about their school experience, their experience in work or further education, and as they began their journey back into HE. Support then became a theme within its own right and examples of where support was evidenced within the interviews were used to create sub-themes. This initial scoping of the data was an iterative process that helped me to develop some of the themes that will be reported in the next chapter.
To address the challenge of detachment from the context (Weitzman, 2000), I then re-read each of the interview transcripts in order to place the findings within the participants’ contexts. The ongoing data analysis process involved constant reference back to the transcripts thereafter. While NVivo was helpful during the initial coding phase, using it created a sense of detachment from the rich context of the interview data and therefore at this stage a more manual method of data analysis was adopted using PowerPoint. This helped further organise the themes, providing quotes as examples in the process. An example of this approach is presented in Appendix 11.

The reflective process of data analysis ensured that my preconceptions were continually challenged, and this allowed me to ensure that I was providing participants with the opportunity to open up their lifeworld (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000) within the context of my own professional experience.

4.7. Phase 4 Secondary data analysis

Any document can be in scope for documentary analysis. Agendas, attendance registers, minutes of meetings, diaries, reports and survey data are all legitimate sources of evidence (Bowen, 2009). Within the HE sector there are many internal and external sources of information generated by, on behalf of or about a provider and have been used as a source of evidence and rationale within the Introduction and Literature Review chapters of this thesis. Other secondary sources of information were considered:

- Quality Enhancement Review (QER)
- National Student Survey (NSS)
- Institutional APPs across the sector
- OU’s Student Experience on a Module Survey (SEaM)

Upon a review of the above in terms of their alignment with the findings emerging from previous phases a decision was made to focus on the SEaM survey as a form of validating the findings that were emerging from the primary data analysis. The reasons for this decision was based on the ability of the QER and NSS to disaggregate general findings to reflect the sampling criteria used within my research. The review of institutional APPs had already been undertaken by the OFS and reported against the number of actions taken by institution in relation to adult and part-time learners.
The report also identified at what stage of the student journey these actions were targeted. This information was useful to include within the literature review chapter as evidence of approaches to widening participation to adult learners, but no additional analysis was required within the data collection phase of the research. The SEaM survey however was of particular relevance to the case study as questions asked were directly relevant to the emerging findings from phase 1 and 2 and there was an ability to break the data down to reflect the sampling criteria used within the primary data collection phase.

The SeAM survey is an optional survey offered to students at the end of their module which seeks feedback on their experience in terms of

- Quality
- Assessment feedback
- Tutor support
- Module content
- Overall experience

Further details of the SEaM survey are provided in Appendix 4.

### 4.7.1. Analysis of the SEaM survey

A statistical report of the Student Experience on a Module Survey (SEaM) was provided by the University’s Data and Student Analytics (D&SA) team. Whilst it was not possible to align the sampling criteria exactly to that used within phases 1 and 2 of the data collection process, certain demographics were able to be filtered. This enabled a general perspective of the issues that students were feeding back. The criteria used was:

- Aged 25 – 55
- Low socio-economic group⁵

The report was requested to show responses for:

- Access students
- Level 4 students who had completed an Access course

---

⁵ Low socio-economic group is defined as students living in the most deprived areas (based on Index of Multiple Deprivation) and/or with low prior educational qualifications (less than 2 A levels).
• Level 4 students who had not completed an Access course

In total this equated to 83 students who had just completed an Access module and 566 who had just completed a Level 4 module. 66 of the latter had passed an Access module prior to the completion of their Level 4 module.

A gap analysis was then undertaken to identify if there were differences to the responses from across the different cohorts.

The survey questions of most relevance to the findings that emerged from the participant interviews were:

• Contact from my tutor at the start of the module helped me get started with my studies.
• I could get in touch with my tutor when necessary
• I was satisfied with the support provided by my tutor on this module.
• My tutor encouraged me in my studies.
• My tutor’s feedback on assessed tasks explained the mark that I received.
• My tutor’s feedback on assessed tasks helped me prepare for the next assessment.
• My tutor’s feedback on assessed tasks helped me to learn.

Whilst the analysis of this data provided some interesting insight, the completion of the survey is optional. In addition, some of the number of responses, notably from Access students were low. The findings therefore must be treated with caution.

4.8. Chapter summary

Chapter 4 has provided an account of how the research design, methodological framework and research methods have been implemented to answer the research question ‘to what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning?’. Using a three-phase approach during the data collection period of the research ensured continual reflection and facilitated amendments to the process, the research methods and data analysis originally planned. This has enabled the objectives of the research to address the issues that help to answer the specific research questions:
1. *How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?*

2. *How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?*

Chapter 5 will present the findings of the research, developed through the data collection and analysis presented in this Chapter.
Chapter 5. Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of interview and institutional data as a result of the data analysis process described in Chapter 4. Phases 1 and 2 of the study produced some rich data through the stories that participants told in relation to their experiences as adult learners returning to formal learning in an HE environment. Phases 3 and 4 provided an opportunity to validate some of the findings emerging from phases 1 and 2, through a focus group with students, interviews with tutors, educational advisors and a policymaker, plus analysis of secondary data held by the case study institution. My position in terms of embedding national policy into institutional policy and practice is crucial to problematising and overcoming the challenges that the research findings present, aiming to support the alignment of policy and practice within the context of adult learning and widening participation. The analysis supports the research question which asks how effective approaches to widening participation are in supporting adult learners returning to formal learning and specifically:

1. How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?

2. How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?

5.2 Findings from phases 1 and 2

The analysis of the interview data resulted in five main themes which are presented below:

- School experience
  This area includes participants’ experiences of school in relation to their perceived level of academic ability amongst their peers and their teachers, the ambitions of participants in relation to those of the school, and the impact of peer and pupil-teacher relationships
• **Home life and parental influence**

This area includes participants’ experience outside of school, particularly in relation to relationships with family members.

• **Learning trajectories**

This area includes participants’ engagement in further learning in the form of further education colleges, apprenticeship schemes and adult education courses in numeracy, literacy and computing skills.

• **Decisions to return to study**

This area includes participants’ perceived pressure from more educated peers within the workplace, encouragement within their professional and personal environments, and a developing self-belief that they are smarter than they thought and the motivation to re-engage through support from others.

• **Experience of studying with the OU**

This area includes participants’ experiences from initial engagement with the OU through the first year of their degree programme, and covers issues relating to tutor support, engagement with peers and pedagogical models, including online tutorials and forums.

Within each of the high-level themes identified above, particular issues emerged which align with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, particularly:

• Social and cultural, family and peer influence on learning (Biesta, 2008; Tuckett and Field, 2016; Rubenson, 2011)

• Learning as infectious/success breeds participation (Cross, 1981; Tuckett and Field, 2016)

• Types of learner (Cross, 1981; Gorard and Smith, 2006; Biesta, 2008;)

• Lifelong learning, informal, formal and non-formal learning (Schuller and Watson, 2009; Field, 2006; Schuller, 2017)

• Adult learning (Knowles, 1980; Cross, 1981; Mezirow, 1991; Jarvis, 2001; Illeris, 2018)
• Critical pedagogy and transformative learning (Freire, 1972; Mezirow, 1991; hooks, 1994)
• Adult learners (McGivney, 1996; McAllister, 2010; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Merrill, 2004)

The supporting evidence for each theme as evidenced by the experiences of the research participants will be explored in detail in this section. Chapter 6 will present a discussion of the themes, reflecting upon the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and directly in response to the research questions highlighted above. Participant identities have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms throughout.

5.2.1 School experience

The insights that participants revealed in terms of their past educational experiences undoubtedly had an impact on their return to learning and their subsequent engagement. However, the research reveals that approaches to widening participation appear to fail to take account of these experiences beyond specific programmes that seek to develop confidence in academic ability and study skills. Three sub-themes emerged when analysing the participants' stories of their previous school experiences:

• academic positioning
• support from professionals
• relationships with peers.

These themes resemble the concepts of dispositional, situational and institutional barriers to learning identified by Gorard, Rees and Fevre (1999) within the overall context of adult learning and the characteristics of adult learners as lacking in confidence, being time-poor and risk-averse (Butcher, 2015b). Each of these three bulleted sub-themes are explored in detail below and will be illustrated by appropriate quotations taken from the interview transcripts to support the interpretation.

5.2.1.1 Finding 1 - Academic positioning within compulsory education

Academic positioning was the theme title given to the perceived position of participants in terms of their academic ability compared with their peers.
From the participants’ stories, academic positioning was important, and relates to how they perceived themselves academically within the learning environment, e.g., top, middle or bottom of the class. Two sub-themes emerged within the context of academic positioning: aspirational misalignment and being academically average.

5.2.1.1 Aspirational misalignment

Whilst together there are clear differences between participants’ responses based on their academic ability, for some, they considered themselves to be academically confident, but their aspirations did not meet those of the school. Aspirational misalignment was the theme title given to the perception of participants that their educational or career aspirations did not align with the educational environment in which they were studying.

[I]t was all about mainly getting people into rugby or tennis or ...  
there was nothing to do, they didn’t support you like academically,  
it was more “Come on, you need to do sports”.

Julie

If you went into the armed forces or you weren’t going to university you were kind of just in a vacuum until you left.

Miles

The reflections by Louise, Gary and Miles illustrated how they perceived a misalignment of aspirations between themselves and the school which left them feeling unsupported within their educational environment. This resulted in disengagement from their formal compulsory education. Gary’s perception that teachers focused on those children who wanted to continue studying beyond compulsory education, was shared by several participants, and it was clear that he felt neglected by the teachers. For Miles, the experience of his school environment was that it focused on an aspiration either to attend university or to go into the armed forces. His perception was that if the ambitions of the pupils were not aligned with these two aims, the pupils were ignored, with little support for their future ambitions. In contrast, Julie’s comments suggest that she would have preferred a greater emphasis on supporting her academic needs, rather than the school focusing primarily on encouraging pupils into sports such as rugby or tennis.
Jane felt that her aspirations were misaligned with those of the school as a result of the presence of her older sister (by 10 years) who she perceived to be a ‘highflyer’. She explains how her sister took on the position of head girl, had her work showcased constantly around the school and was generally an all-round exceptional pupil. Jane’s recollection of her school experience was that the teachers ignored her on the assumption that she was like her sister and because of that reputation, she did not need any help.

*I came along 10 years later, same surname. Oh, you’re ‘such and such’s sister… we don’t need to do anything with you. And basically, I was ignored because they thought: oh, she’ll be fine, she doesn’t need any help. And I rebelled and I think with the benefit of hindsight I was quite bored in school and I wasn’t really being stretched.*

The stories told by participants about misalignment did not apply only to aspirations at school but were also evident within the home environment. Many participants spoke about the influences of their parents and family in relation to the direction of their learning. Parents were pivotal to these decisions. Donna, Miles and Freddie all spoke about the ‘conversations that were never had’ in relation to considering A levels and university options. These options were often aligned with the directives of the school.

*I came from a family where … I think if I'd said to my parents I'd wanted to go to college, they would have said that's absolutely fine you can do that, but they didn't actively encourage me to think along those lines, and because the school didn't ...I had a careers evening and my choices given to me were to go and work in the local factory making underwear ... there were no expectations that anybody would do anything out of the ordinary.*

Donna

Similarly, Miles reflects on the conversations that were not had with his parents in relation to his future career ambitions. Because he was not interested in the school’s focus on a military career or university, he was largely left to his own devices. For
Freddie, who had an ambition to join the Royal Marines, his parents’ influence in making him wait until he was 18 to decide resulted in him falling into an apprenticeship scheme within a bakery, which is where he remained. He recalls his parents not actively talking to him about university but felt that if it was something he wished to do they would have been supportive. His experience seems similar to that of Miles in that they both drifted into jobs without any formal consideration or decision being made.

Other parental influences were also a major factor in the learning experiences of the research participants. Financial considerations were a particular factor for Maureen and Liz, although for different reasons. For Maureen, her wages were needed to contribute to the family income and although she wanted to progress her learning, the costs of studying were too high. For Liz, her aspiration to do an art degree was quashed by her father.

*I always wanted to do art, I loved art but my dad said there was no money in it and that I should learn a trade. I went to secretarial college and was a secretary all my life.*

Participant recollections reveal a range of influences that impacted on their aspirations during their compulsory education, and subsequently impacted on their engagement with formal learning. These influences relate to the priorities within the school environment, the advice and guidance provided by teachers and parents (and lack of it) and the perception of the value of certain subjects over others. However, other more subtle influences were also at play and will be discussed below.

### 5.2.1.1.2 Invisibly average

For others, their position as academically average meant that they felt ignored by the teachers who focused on higher achievers or those who required additional support. Invisibly average refers to participants who perceived themselves to be academically average, but which meant that they were left to get on with their work, whilst the teacher focused either on the high achievers or those that needed more support.
They want to concentrate on those people who they perceive as being, you know, “We’re going to be really educated, we’re going to go to college, university and everything else.”

Gary

For some participants, the perceived misalignment of their aspirations reflects the range of academic abilities of which they were aware. However, a particular theme emerged relating to those students who considered themselves to be academically average. These participants felt that their individual academic needs were not being met as a result of a perceived focus by the teachers on either the top performing children or those requiring additional support. As Louise’s quotation below illustrates, those considered to be academically average appeared to be ignored.

And I liked, I really liked learning, but I always felt I was a middle stream child and our school very much focused on the more brainy, popular children and the children that were like remedial or below average. So, if you were average, you just sort of got on with it really and got through it.

Louise

Sally recalls an experience similar to Louise although makes reference to the teachers ‘firefighting the naughty kids...and the naughty ones getting a lot of the teachers’ time and attention and if you’re doing alright you tend to get overlooked’

Sally

She also refers to how children who are academically gifted or academically challenged receive most of the teachers’ attention, with less attention being given to the academically average children.

You’re either at the top of the class and you’re excelling and it kind of comes naturally and it’s easy or you’re ... at the bottom of the class and you’re getting all the teachers’ time and attention. I think it’s the mid-level kids that get overlooked really.
Fortunately, as Louise recalls, her positive approach to learning meant that any impact of this in terms of her academic achievement was minimal as she was able to motivate herself to learn. However, it was clear from the conversation with her that she felt she could have achieved more if she had been pushed harder by her teachers. Sally however, whilst trying to be persuaded by one particular teacher to stay on to do A levels, decided that this was not the route for her and embarked on a career within the hospitality sector, within which she had already been working. Her decision was not only based on her school experience but also relates to the impact of her homelife, which will be addressed in Section 5.2.2 below.

The data makes it clear that participants’ experiences were different, and the way they interpreted their experiences was unique to them. Participants like Louise felt that attention was focused either on the more able or those who were less able. On the other hand, Gary’s view was that if you did not aspire to pursue learning beyond school, you were ignored, which contrasts with Louise’s perspective relating to focusing on the less able. Lee felt that the school’s emphasis on particular career paths excluded those who did not have the same career aspirations. In their totality however, the findings suggest that recognising individual needs, abilities and aspirations is vital to ensuring that individuals can achieve their full potential.

It is useful to contrast participant perspectives regarding their academic positioning with that of Professor Les Ebdon, Director of Fair Access at the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). In my interview with him in January 2019, he spoke about his own experience, self-identifying as coming from a disadvantaged background. His experience differed from the students within my research as it was more aligned to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering elite universities. He argued that the level of challenge for the brightest pupils needed to be sustained and that the focus should not just be on the middle pupils. This suggests a potential misalignment between policymakers and student perceptions of the education system, in terms of widening participation. Participants in my research suggest that attention was focused on either the brightest children or those requiring additional support, not the middle stream pupils, as Professor Ebdon suggested.
5.2.1.1.3 Reinforcing insecurities

Reinforcing insecurities refers to the approaches that participants recall being adopted by teachers which served to reinforce their insecurities within the school environment.

Participant stories revealed that particular approaches to teaching that were adopted by teachers reinforced many of the insecurities that the participants experienced within the school environment and had a real impact on participants. These experiences are not exclusive to pupils who struggled academically. Angela reveals that she was quite confident academically but was very shy. She recalled how reading aloud in whole class reading sessions and group working impacted upon her self-confidence. Lee also recounted his experience of whole class reading which further reinforced his insecurities over his academic ability.

*W*e’d have to stand up in the classroom and read in front of the whole class and I’d get comments off the other students: “Oh, he’s thick”, and they’d all start laughing. So, I’d get myself into trouble in the lessons to be sent outside.

Lee’s lack of confidence in reading and his exposure to this kind of classroom experience significantly affected him to the point where he would become disruptive so that he was removed from the class. His experience was further exacerbated by his perception that the lack of support received from his teacher in relation to his learning was an intentional attempt to reinforce his insecurities. For Lee, this related to the challenges that he faced with reading and writing. He recollected various aspects of his experience, feeling that his learning was not being supported as he struggled to understand the work. To illustrate this perceived lack of support, Lee recalled how after submitting a piece of work, the teacher questioned his ability and accused him of copying from another pupil.

*W*e was doing these maths questions and I’d actually done the maths questions she’d asked, and I’d gone up and I’d handed it in and then she went to me “Who did you copy off?” and I was like “No-one, no-one” and then she said to me “You’re too stupid to do that”.

127
While the experiences of Angela and Lee result in different perceptions of themselves academically, they are similar in the impact of the learning environment on their engagement with learning and their self-confidence, which they subsequently carry with them as they move through life. The impact of where participants perceived themselves to be positioned academically within the school environment is explored below.

5.2.1.4 Impact of academic positioning

This section has revealed three aspects relating to academic positioning during compulsory education for the participants in my research. These positions are diverse, revealing that issues emerge from being academically able, struggling academically, and not possessing the same aspirations as participants perceived the school to have. Misalignment of aspirations is evident in relation to the advice and guidance received from schools and parents which, for some participants, was non-existent. While it is evident that participants’ experiences were diverse and unique to them, they reveal a commonality in the sense of feeling let down by the school environment through a lack of support for their learning or for future careers. In general, this was not as apparent in relation to the lack of advice and guidance received from parents, as some participants suggested the onus was on them to instigate the conversations.

Analysis of the interviews, however, revealed other themes relevant to the school experience that expand on Lee’s experience in particular. These themes relate to participants’ relationships with their peers within the school environment, which not only contributed to their subsequent engagement with learning, but their confidence and self-perception as they progressed beyond compulsory education. This theme is explored further below.

5.2.1.2 Finding 2 - Peer relationships – undermining of personal confidence

Peer relationships refers to the relationships that participants had with other pupils within the school environment.

5.2.1.2.1 Lack of support

A key theme that emerged from the interviews regarding participants’ experiences of school relates to being bullied. While the nature of the bullying was not necessarily
the main focus of the conversations, there was a clear view that participants felt a lack of support to deal effectively with the perpetrators. Lack of support refers to participants’ reflections on how they felt they were supported by the school in dealing with some of the issues that they faced in their relationships with their peers.

The stories told by participants in relation to their experiences of bullying were, in some cases, particularly powerful, reflecting the sensitivities and emotional impact that research of this nature can have on both the participant and the researcher. Their stories revealed that the impact of their experience continued well into adulthood, resulting in adult vulnerability within the HE environment. During these conversations it was necessary to reflect continually on the conversation to ensure that the welfare of both the participant and the researcher was considered.

Louise reflects on her experience below:

*My mum would come up the school and complain about children. They would drag the mother in. That would make it even worse for me cos then the child would totally not talk to me. It’s just, there was no bullying support at that stage, there was no mentor, no teaching assistant. It was very lonely and scary.*

Most participant recollections related to a lack of support from the school and from teachers. Jen recalled her school being in denial of the bullying because, as she said, the bullies ‘were seen as being the popular girls by the teachers’. Jen’s experience was made worse by the fact that her bullies were within her group of friends. She acknowledged that this made it more difficult to find support from the teachers, who suggested that she ‘tried to be a bit nicer’. Denial of bullying by the school, was also experienced by Julie.

*When we approached my secondary school about it, they completely denied it was going on. I was coming in with bruises and spit on me and stuff and they were saying “No, no, this is not happening, doesn’t happen in our school”.*

While Julie and Jen both received support from their parents in seeking to resolve the situation, from their perspective this had no effect because the school denied the
bullying was happening. This raises issues of trust in terms of not being believed by those who are in roles of responsibility as well as trust amongst friendship groups. The impact of this as participants progress beyond compulsory education is pertinent, and Jen in particular still finds it hard to develop relationships. She acknowledges that she is more comfortable with relationships in a professional capacity because she is able to maintain a professional distance with her colleagues. Anything more than that which requires her to give more of her personal experience is challenging and not something in which she gets involved. This is likely to have implications for her as she re-engages in a formal learning environment, where the development of her learning is likely to require collaboration with peers and the development of a relationship with her tutor.

Louise’s experience differed from Julie and Jen’s. As a result of the extent of the bullying she experienced, Louise eventually refused to leave her house.

[A]t that stage the school intervened and it was because I was being bullied so much that I was frightened to go out.

This was prior to her self-harming at school in order that she could be sent home.

[B]y the time I got to the age of eight I was deliberately self-harming...in the toilets so that I could be sent home. And the way I used to do that was to deliberately make my nose bleed so that I was sent home. Now, this happened numerous times cos i just wanted to be at home with my mum where I felt safe, you see. And that carried on for a while and I had no counselling for that and no-one actually ever tried to find out what was going on, they just thought I kept getting nose bleeds and kept having to go to hospital to get my nose cauterised.

While the quotation above suggests that Louise did receive support from the school once the bullying got severe, there is clearly an issue regarding the timeliness of the support provided to her by the school, which if implemented earlier could have avoided some of the distressing situations she experienced.

This is a situation that Adam also experienced.
I dropped out of school at the age of fourteen, from bullying and, yeah, just bullying I guess. I’d only just moved to that school and I was there for the entirety of year nine. Teachers didn’t do anything, and it just wasn’t something I brought up at home. It set me back by about a good decade... So, I didn’t go out during the day and then that eventually just carried on. Obviously missing out things with friends at school so they kind of dropped away and then that unfortunately kind of developed into full blown agoraphobia.

From the experiences of both Adam and Louise, bullying resulted in withdrawal from education. The lack of support was particularly pertinent to Adam’s experience in terms of the impact that it had on his slow retreat from education and society more generally.

5.2.1.2.2 Withdrawal from compulsory education

This section deals with the impact of participants’ experiences with their peers on decisions to withdraw from compulsory education.

Not all the participants in the research left school before the compulsory leaving age at the time (16) but the impact of their school experience affected their subsequent educational or career pathways.

The quotations by Miles (Section 5.2.1.1.1) and Jen (Section 5.2.1.2.1) above reflect the impact that disengagement from education had on their subsequent education or career pathways, in Jen’s case as a result of bullying and in Miles’ case, as a result of a lack of advice and guidance in relation to career pathways. Jen’s experience influenced her to apply to college rather than continue her education within her school. She recalls that she did not flourish in this environment, which brought out her anxieties, resulting in her withdrawing from the course early. If Jen’s experience during compulsory education had been different and, as she suggests, she had received more support to address the bullying that she faced, her educational and career pathway may have been different. Her school experience forced her down a pathway that she was not entirely comfortable with and which reinforced her anxieties. Different support while in compulsory education, might have resulted in a
different outcome and her educational trajectory might have followed a more traditional route into HE. While such support may not change the educational trajectory for all students, it does have implications for adults in HE who return to formal education with insecurities generally as a result of being out of education for some time. For students who have similar experiences to Jen, additional insecurities are compounded, and this effectively creates situations where students are faced with ‘double-disadvantages’. Not only are they facing challenges in terms of their own confidence in returning to studying, in addition to the possible financial and personal risks that many adult learners face, but they are also coping with legacies of the past which are a constant reminder of their previous negative educational experiences. This can create a constant battle within themselves because the programmes of study they engage with focus on enabling their confidence to grow, but this is constantly challenged by their inner anxieties.

For other participants, their school experience was less impactful in terms of anxieties like those that Jen and Louise faced, but the battle with their inner selves is still evident, particularly as they compare themselves with other seemingly more successful colleagues and peers. Following his completion of compulsory education, Miles began working in a supermarket. He comments that this was supposed to be temporary, but that 20 years later he is still there. He is acutely aware of the perceived success of his peers which seemingly he missed out on as a result of the lack of advice and guidance he received whilst at school. In a similar way to Jen, he reflected that if he had received support that was more tailored to his needs, he may have followed a different pathway. This could have prevented his current feeling that he let his parents down.

While the impact of their school experience has affected Jen and Miles’s career pathways, the impact on their mental health is seemingly less overt than in the case of Louise and Adam. Although Louise achieved her O levels and completed compulsory education, as she was quite academic, she withdrew quite significantly. While her home life potentially exacerbated her situation, the strict and regimented environment may have contributed to her ability to achieve her O levels and help her to develop an approach to learning that drew upon her resilience in the face of adversity. In both cases, however, the impact of the students’ experiences was
severe, with Louise and Adam attributing the onset of their agoraphobia to their school experience and the bullying behaviour they endured. This impacted significantly on both participants for many years after they finished attending compulsory education.

5.2.1.2.3 Peer attitudes to learning

Many participants revealed the direct influence of the negative experiences they faced in their relationships with their peers at school, but there was also evidence of less immediate influences on the learning trajectory of the participants. For some, the individual motivation to learn was clearly evident, and participants tried to pursue their goals irrespective of their peers and despite the challenges that they faced. Amanda explicitly recalls the impact of her peers on her non-continuation of A levels. Most of her friends had not pursued this pathway and had undertaken vocational qualifications such as a General National Vocational Qualification (GNVC).

*I did really well at GCSEs, loved school at that point, and then I went to a 6th form college and I did English, history and politics A levels, but none of my friends did that course, they all went off and did something completely different, and it was really really difficult.*

Amanda recalls the feeling of ‘going it alone’ as she transitioned onto an academic pathway through a 6th form college and contributes this to her decision to drop out of the A levels she was pursuing. This was exacerbated by a lack of support from her family or school, particularly as none of her family had progressed learning beyond compulsory education. She subsequently pursued employment through the hotel where she had been working part-time during her compulsory education.

For some participants, the impact of peers was clearly significant in terms of their engagement within compulsory education. Miles is potentially an outlier in terms of being less influenced by those around him, whose educational journey was being mapped out by the priorities of his school in terms of military careers or university, with little advice being offered to him in terms of taking an alternative career trajectory. From the interviews in my research, it appears that the ethos of the school or home environment and individual motivation are particularly important if
the negative impact that participants experienced in terms of peer relationships is to be overcome.

5.2.1.2.4 Impact of peer relationships

This section covers the impact that peer relationships had on participants’ decisions to withdraw from compulsory education.

The experiences that participants reflected upon during their interviews, reveal the significant influence that their peers had on their engagement in education at school-age. There was generally a perceived lack of support from teachers in dealing with the situations that arose and also lack of support in transitioning to a new educational environment for some. These perceived failings resulted in disengagement and early withdrawal from compulsory education for many participants, which affected their future educational and career pathways, and in some cases resulted in more severe mental health issues. Participants talked about a lack of support not only from teachers but also from professional services. The conversations they reported suggest that these services did little to relate to or acknowledge the particular circumstances which participants were experiencing. This has implications for adults in HE environments in terms of the need to build trust with tutors which is crucial for successful re-engagement. However, not all participants spoke about their experiences negatively in the sense that they saw their decisions at the time as the right ones and felt that they would always return to learning in some form. Opportunities to enable this to happen in the form of adult education are therefore paramount.

5.2.1.3 Summary - the impact of the school experience

The themes that emerged from talking with participants about their school experiences clearly align with the reported lack of confidence either in academic ability or within the educational environment. In many cases, this has affected participants’ future engagement with learning and also within employment settings. It is clear from the conversations, that participants generally felt let down by the education system in its widest sense during compulsory education. Participant reflections on the classroom environment suggest an inability of teachers to recognise and respond to individual needs, which was reinforced by the actions of
other pupils. In the wider school environment, a perceived inability of teachers and professionals to deal with particular situations faced by participants was evident. This impacted upon the future educational and career trajectories of the participants. Three overarching themes emerge from the analysis of the interviews in relation to participant experience of the school environment:

- the importance of support both academically and professionally
- the recognition of individual needs and circumstances
- the need for empathy and understanding.

Each of these themes has implications for widening participation initiatives aimed at adult learners, which will be explored within the discussion chapter.

5.2.2 Long-term impact of home life

As has already been alluded to, the influence of parents was particularly apparent within participants’ accounts of education/career choice and life direction. The majority of participants referred positively to the support they received from their family in relation to addressing some of the challenges experienced at school. However, there were some who felt their home life contributed to their negative experience of school, particularly in relation to their self-confidence.

Three main areas of discussion emerged during conversations about the influence of family during participants’ school years:

- type of upbringing
- nature of relationship between parent and child
- instability within the home.

The conversations that took place in relation to participants’ home lives were particularly personal and emotive, and required a substantial amount of empathy and understanding on my part. It was necessary to ensure throughout the conversation that participants were happy to talk about the experience, and that they felt free to stop at any point, should they wish.

5.2.2.1 Type of upbringing

For Louise, in particular, her upbringing played a large part in her experience of school. She attended a convent, and the strict upbringing at home was echoed within
the recollections of her school experience. She recalls living in a very strict household, with a history of mental health issues and violence in her extended family.

_I had a very unhappy school life, which was impacted by the fact that I also had such a strict home life as well. I remember being smacked at school by nuns a couple of times... My dad also was very strict and ran our house like the army... My mum and dad were both very anxious people, and my father grew up with a mum who had manic depression and would take to her bed for weeks at a time. And his father didn’t speak to him until he was fifteen years of age. So, he had a really awful childhood. And so, did my mum who had their old grandmother live with them, great grandmother, who was very cruel to my mum and would hit her over the back with chairs and, you know._

Louise was keen to mention that she knew she was loved by her parents but the particular environment within which she was brought up clearly had an impact upon her own life as future relationships replicated the violent atmosphere that she had witnessed.

_I was engaged for eight years to somebody who had an alcoholic mother, and he was very aggressive and very controlling. He was always cheating on me. I then married somebody that I knew from school ..., that was the worst four years of my life, because he was a real, real bully, but he sort of worshipped the ground I walked on and watched where I went, what I did, controlled my money._

### 5.2.2.2 Nature of relationship between parent and child

The second sub-theme relates to the power relationship within the family environment. Sally recalls her relationship with her mother whose seemingly strong opinions and dominant nature affected Sally’s confidence and willingness to present her own arguments for fear of being laughed at or shouted down. This relationship played a major part in Sally’s decision to find employment rather than continue with her education (alongside her experience of school, presented in Section 5.2.1.1.2).
The impact of this experience is clear to see as Sally recalls her experience of returning to learning (covered in more detail in Section 5.2.4). It is relevant however in terms of the long-term impact of her homelife as she can avoid the pressures imposed upon her by others through the particular mode of learning within the case study institution.

I haven’t got anyone kind of looking over my shoulder or making me, you know, kind of feel that I’m under any pressure to do something’. And, do you know what, I don’t think I feel as vulnerable doing it through OU. I feel slightly anonymous

During the conversation with Gary, it was clear that he did not want to go into detail about his upbringing, just referring to it as ‘bad’. He did talk about the impact of his experience which resulted in him leaving home at 14 and living in a barn. It was clear that Gary had little support at home at this point, although this did not affect his determination to continue to attend school. When the weather got too severe, an aunt eventually allowed him to stay with her but, as he recalls, he felt she saw this as an inconvenience, particularly when she began a new relationship. The impact of this was that Gary had to find employment to pay his keep, rather than embarking on any further form of education. It was evident in Gary’s recollections that his feeling of not belonging was dominant, and when he spoke of his service in the army, he described it as providing him with the family he never had.

They gave me a family, they gave me some people to work with, they gave me some people with if you came to me and you didn’t know how to do something, and I did I could help you. If I had a problem, I could come to you... but you didn’t feel stupid asking a question.

5.2.2.3 Summary – the impact of home life

The findings presented suggest that participants’ home life impacted upon their engagement with formal education to different degrees. For Louise, her strict home impacted upon her experience of school and how she engaged with and was perceived within that environment. For Gary, while he was engaged with education at school, the difficult upbringing he had created an environment where further study
was not an option. For Sally, the persistent challenges to her opinions by her mother reinforced a sense of failure within her and challenged her academic abilities. For all these three participants, the combination of school and home life created an environment that affected their future engagement with education and the world of work. While Louise, was determined to continue in formal education, for the others, the result of their experience was a total disengagement from education.

5.2.3 Learning trajectories

The previous section on school experience highlighted the diverse educational journeys that participants experienced during compulsory education. These journeys were influenced by:

- participants’ perceptions of their academic position within the school environment
- the support (or lack of support) they felt they received
- the relationship with peers.

The impact of these experiences on participants’ educational journeys differed, ranging from those who:

- completed compulsory education (although being disengaged) and progressed to further education
- completed compulsory education (although being disengaged) and progressed to employment
- withdrew from compulsory education completely and journeyed to training schemes or college
- withdrew from compulsory education completely with no further immediate employment or study.

These four trajectories are important in relation to my research as the distance travelled in returning to formal study is likely to be greater for some than others. Those who gained qualifications at school are likely to be in a stronger position academically than those who did not. Equally, those who continued to study in different guises, are likely to require less support upon entering HE than those who have not undertaken any type of formal study since they left school.
5.2.3.1 Finding 1 - Engagement with FE or adult education

For some participants, their experience of school impacted upon their attainment and self-confidence but their desire to learn was not affected (Julie, Jen, Angela, Louise). As presented in the literature review chapter, a large proportion of adult learners study in colleges and employer-funded study is also common, particularly following the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. The findings from my research support this as some participants sought to continue their education either through a further education college (FEC) or what was then called a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) (Weatherley, 1983).

Angela’s accounts reveal a highly motivated student who attempted university following several FE and adult education courses but withdrew when she fell pregnant with her son. In contrast, Julie and Jen’s experience was significantly affected by their past experience at school. Jen has positive recollections of the learning environment in the college that she attended, particularly the support she received from her tutors that she felt took account of her identity as a mature learner, rather than treating her as a schoolchild. Despite this, her anxieties and lack of confidence which stemmed from her experience at school eventually influenced her decision to leave. Although engagement in learning following compulsory education was unsuccessful for some participants, it could be argued to some extent that those students who ‘loved to learn’ (Louise, Julie, Angela) were always likely to continue their learning journey in some form.

Much adult learning is provided through employment and supported by employers. Gary drifted from working in a bar to becoming a bouncer and finally undertook management training within the organisation, to enable him to run a night club. While he engaged with the learning, it differs from that of the participants mentioned previously in the sense that it was to meet a particular training need, rather than born of a desire for learning per se. This is evident within the case study institution where many professional development courses, such as the MBA are employer-funded.

Lee had several jobs working in factories and workshops. He spoke of his school experience having a serious impact upon his self-confidence but none the less, he attempted to undertake an apprenticeship. Eventually, he withdrew because he was ‘unable to keep up with the paperwork’. This work-based approach to learning was...
similar to Gary’s and reflects traditional approaches to adult education. However, Lee’s struggle with reading and writing, which was not identified or supported in his apprenticeship, impacted upon his ability to complete the course.

### 5.2.3.2 Finding 2 - Experience of further education

Lee’s engagement with formal education following his attempt at an apprenticeship was quite spontaneous, resulting from a casual conversation with a colleague at work who suggested enrolling on a maths course. Given Lee’s experience of school, this was likely to have been a big decision but, as he recalls, perceiving it as ‘a bit of a laugh’ to get out of work, removed some of the negative academic connotations. This decision was pivotal to Lee’s subsequent engagement with formal learning although it did not remove his support needs, resulting from his previous experience of education. The support for him came through his colleague at work and following successful completion of his maths course and subsequent enrolment on a literacy course, his needs were ratified by a formal diagnosis of dyslexia.

> I think it was finding out I was dyslexic actually; it changed a lot for me because when she actually told me, I’m a bit embarrassed, but I actually sobbed, I cried my eyes out.

Lee’s experience is built upon an opportunistic moment, rather than something that was specifically planned. It illustrates the impact that one, seemingly small decision, can have on a person’s educational journey, their perceived academic capability, sense of self-confidence and self-belief. The support Lee received from his colleague at work however was pivotal to him continuing to engage in learning and subsequent decision to embark on HE study.

In a similar vein Alison’s experience and subsequent engagement in a formal HE course was influenced by her participation in one-off courses offered by her union. It demonstrates how small opportunities to engage in learning within the workplace can influence decisions to re-engage in formal learning.

> [M]y union that I’m with ... they did a couple of like... one-day free courses where you can go along, and they do all these courses like one there was like behaviour management and stuff like that. And one of them I went on they were talking about this, and that you
could contact the OU and do an open access course and it would be for free. I did have a look and then I thought ‘oh that looks quite interesting’ and so I signed up for that.

Both the experiences of Lee and Alison demonstrate how, whilst re-engagement with learning was not something that they had planned to do, the opportunities that came their way through the course of their employment was the defining moment which resulted in them making the decision to return to formal learning and subsequently registering on a formal HE qualification.

5.2.3.3 Summary – learning trajectories
Following compulsory education, participants’ stories reveal their journeys in terms of participation in further education through college and work-based learning initiatives and employment. It is evident that for some, learning was always something that they would consider, although their recollections focus on learning for a profession or trade, rather than transformative learning delivered through non-vocational qualifications. The support provided by one or two individuals was a recurring theme within participant stories in relation to their ambition to embark on HE study. The support came from colleagues at work and also from friends and family. The section which follows will explore the impact of this support on participants’ decisions to embark on HE level study following a substantial period out of education.

5.2.4 Returning to formal study
Previous sections have highlighted the impact of the school experience, home life and the world of further education and work on participants’ levels of confidence. The stories participants told reveal a process by which a shift begins to occur for many, from feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence to gradual belief in oneself, driven by their own desire to progress, and the encouragement and support of others.

Miles worked in a supermarket, a job he describes as ‘only supposed to be for pin money’. He has remained in the same company since he left school and began thinking about returning to study as a way of establishing his position within the company. Miles chose the vignette describing student B as the one he could identify with most but adapted it to his own particular circumstances. He reflects that he did not feel inferior within his workplace but thought that the managers ignored his
experience and level of expertise. He felt that his opinion was not valued which, over time, impacted upon his self-confidence and self-esteem. Seeing newly graduated employees coming into the organisation with what he perceived as a level of confidence in their own opinions and position with the company, Miles began exploring options for further study. Interestingly, while Miles was not influenced by his peers at school, the influence of his peers as an adult is notable.

The subtle influences encouraging Miles to undertake further learning are also reflected in Melanie’s experience. She recalled a particular job environment within which she began to develop a greater sense of self-confidence and self-worth. She talks about the encouraging words from her colleagues and the impact that they had on her over time.

Some of it was just really simple, like: “With a bit more experience you’d be fantastic. You’re already doing really well.” It’s just little, simple, sort of almost off-the-cuff remarks that ... actually they can mean quite a lot coming from someone who doesn’t really know you.

Adam’s story was slightly different as he suffered from severe depression once he withdrew from school and struggled with medication to control it. He recalled undertaking work as a casual labourer but acknowledged that his mental health played a major part in his ability to engage in continuous employment. He acknowledged the support of one friend, without whom he would not have even attempted to go to work. However, for Adam the most influential people in his journey back to formal education were his grandparents who gave him the opportunity to volunteer at a charity where his grandfather was the Chairman. Although the impact of this work was not immediate as a result of Adam’s mental health issues, he recalled how slowly, over time, his confidence within that environment began to build, due to familiarity with the surroundings and the people within it. Adam credits his grandparents for giving him the support that enabled him to turn his life around but gives little acknowledgement to the impact of his own motivation and determination in enabling him to embark on HE study with the OU.
These examples illustrate a common theme that runs through the stories of all the participants in that they place huge emphasis on the support and encouragement they received from their peers, their families, and friends in enabling many of them to take their first steps back into formal education. The support received takes many different forms and goes beyond simply helping to submit an application or choose a university.

This finding was supported by secondary evidence through my own professional experience and the anecdotal evidence that the university receives through student feedback throughout their study experience and is particularly relevant for students who study on the Access programme. For those participants who demonstrate a love of learning, there was clearly a sense of it being the right time to study. For others, whose previous educational experience did not interest them in further learning, the impetus was a desire to do something more with their lives. There was often a focus on psychology courses, an interest pursued as a result of personal experience.

In his interview in January 2019, Professor Ebdon reflects on the need for sustained opportunities for mature students, differentiating between the circumstances particular to men and women. He refers to the historic barriers for women to enter HE, where they were encouraged to go into office work and start a family, which may still be the situation for some pupils for whom university education within their community is not considered an option. For the women in my study, this situation was not generally reflected although Liz was persuaded to go to secretarial college rather than study art on the insistence of her father. Several female participants did seek to continue their education through other means following compulsory education, although having a family undoubtedly was a factor in whether HE was a consideration. Professor Ebdon also spoke of the lack of maturity of some male pupils who, although attending university, may not achieve very good results. This situation initially seems to resonate with Lee’s story where he spoke about the opportunity to do a maths course ‘as it would be a laugh and an opportunity to get out of work for the afternoon’. However, Lee’s situation presents a different perspective, which is a consequence of him undertaking small pieces of learning following compulsory education. This experience has slowly begun to develop a sense of self-confidence in
his academic ability which has resulted in a belief in himself that he is not as ‘thick’ as his teachers made him out to be. Embarking on HE study is his attempt to prove this.

Analysis of the interviews suggests that there was evidence of the development of confidence to different degrees during the years after participants’ experiences of compulsory education. The rate and extent of this development differed among participants but there were defining moments in this process which were based on the need to understand and make sense of the traumatic and life-changing events that they experienced. Thereafter, the support they received from friends and family in making the decision to return to learning is pivotal to their re-engagement, as is the opportunity to participate in taster courses.

It is clear that participants’ confidence had been affected by their previous experiences. Despite Louise’s recollection of being an average child academically, her comments relating to embarking on HE study suggest a lack of confidence in her academic ability. This implies that it is not just those students who perceived themselves as struggling academically that are affected by a lack of confidence and suggests that embedding activities to build confidence in academic ability is an approach to widening participation for adult learners that meets a specific need. Such provision is also likely to support the needs of students like Miles, Donna and Jen who appear to have their lack of confidence bolstered but are still vulnerable to having that confidence eroded in particular HE situations. The following section will explore participants’ experiences of taking their first steps into HE through the case study institution.

5.2.4.1 Finding 1 - The transformative power of learning

Analysis of the participant interviews reveal that many were cautious in relation to returning to learning as a result of being out of formal education for some time. However, having made the decision to return, there was a general level of confidence and appreciation of the opportunity to re-engage in formal learning. For some, these decisions were always going to be part of their journey (Julie, Kirsty, Melanie, Angela, Mya, Maureen) but for others, lifechanging events, such as the death of a family member (Adam) or personal health issues (Gary), created the conditions for a re-evaluation of their lives.
Sally referred to a level of maturity that she feels has enabled her to make the decision to return to learning at this point. She explained that it is unlikely she would have stuck at university when she was younger as a result of a lack of maturity. This is a perspective shared by Jen who revealed that she is more confident now due to maturity and, while she still can feel anxious, she is able to overcome that better than when she was younger. Professor Ebdon also made reference to the need for widening participation to begin during childhood. While he was clearly coming from the perspective of widening participation to HE for school-aged children, his thoughts clearly align with notions of lifelong learning which, if its principles can be embedded within childhood, should support and encourage individuals to see learning as a continuum. This perspective, however, relies on the opportunities for learning to be accessible throughout life and not just within the stages of life determined as of most value by the dominant ideologies within society.

Some participants also revealed an inner confidence which keeps them motivated to continue. Although Julie spoke about a very poor experience of previous education where she was severely bullied, she says this has not affected her in terms of confidence or in her return to learning. Similarly, Sally and Maureen both talked about how they rely on their own confidence to get them through, despite their anxieties and potential knock-downs as they journey through the early years of their HE studies.

Louise commented on the impact of her OU studies and expressed the view that if she had engaged with HE study earlier, she would have been able to deal with situations in her life in a more informed and logical manner. Similarly, Miles and Sally reflect on the impact that OU study has had on their confidence in presenting their own views and opinions. This was a particular challenge for Miles in his work environment where he felt others with more qualifications had more confidence than he did, and they were dismissive of those who disagreed with them.

These experiences are not shared by all participants, though, and it was clear that for some, additional support was needed from their peers, their tutors, family and friends for the transformative benefits of learning to be realised. Donna and Lee’s experiences epitomise this perspective in illustrating how their confidence can be
easily knocked as they engage with the different aspects of HE study. These different aspects are explored in more detail in Findings 2 to 6 later in this chapter.

Excerpts from the interviews with Miles and Jen suggested the positive influence that emotional support can have on them as they journey through their HE studies. In both accounts, they talk of either an actual or metaphorical reassuring hug that what they were doing was right, whatever that was. This support, at points of potential vulnerability, was seen by several participants as being vital to ensuring their confidence was maintained. For Jen, her previous school experience had taught her to surround herself with positive people that maintain her confidence, and she actively seeks out positive environments in many circumstances that she now faces as an adult.

For Jen and Sally, the process of studying has had a dramatic effect on their confidence, and as a result they have developed new strength. This has been reinforced by their exposure to an environment in which individuals are encouraged to present their own arguments which may differ from others but are equally valid. However, not all participants experience their return to learning in this way and continue to experience challenges that could start to erode the confidence with which they initially began their return to learning.
I’m so conscious about my writing. I never write on Facebook, very rarely, because I worry that I’m going to write something on there that I’m going to put the wrong thing or it’s going to be spelt wrong and it’d take me back to them days of when I was a kid.

Lee

For some, striving to become confident, independent leaners through transformative action, is likely to come sooner than for others. The conversation with Professor Ebdon also supported this perspective and supports the evidence that suggests adult learners are not homogeneous (Waller, 2006; Askham, 2008; Mallman and Lee, 2016; Goodchild, 2017), although his perspectives were aimed at all individuals and not specifically at adult learners.

How important it is in education to treat everyone as an individual... the challenge comes in a university when you’ve got tens of thousands of students....But it is about responding to every individual’s needs and avoiding stereotypes that says all these students have this need....I very much favour the model where universities establish a number of support systems for student which are available to all students but try and ensure that those who really need it come on.

The above quotation illustrates Professor Ebdon’s view that support for students within the HE environment should be based on individual needs, rather than as a result of belonging to a particular group. Whilst some of the discussion with Professor Ebdon focused upon enabling young students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access elite universities, other parts of the discussion dealt with the ‘transforming value of education’, during which he reflects on his own experience, coming from a council estate. He supports the arguments for a comprehensive university for all (Blackman, 2017) and the notion that a diverse learning experience provides the best outcomes for students. In this respect, he argues that support should be embedded within institutional practices and should not be available only to those identified as in need. The challenge, acknowledged by Professor Ebdon, and identified in the experiences of the participants in my research, is that it is often the
more confident and proactive students that engage with all the support that is available. As Professor Ebdon suggests, those students more in need are often less likely to engage. Making reference to support for students who have English as a second language, he recalls one student whose English was ‘better than native English speakers here’ but she still attended the extra class ‘because it was free and fun’. Another student who would have benefited from the additional class did not attend because it was perceived to be too challenging. In many ways, the participants within my research reflect this situation, presenting a dichotomy between students who are relatively academic and ‘love to learn’ and those who, like Jill, consider themselves to come from a non-academic background. The evidence from my research suggests that students who are perhaps less confident in engaging with other students and their tutors will be less likely to engage in support programmes that are offered as standard within the qualification pathway.

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed some rich insights into the experiences of participants who returned to a formal learning environment through an initial Access programme prior to studying on an undergraduate programme. Analysis of the institutional Student Experience on a Module (SEaM) survey is also useful in exploring whether participant experiences are reflected more generally across the OU student body. While the interpretation of the data should be treated cautiously because the survey was optional and had low numbers in some cases, the data is useful when considered alongside the findings of my research. Appendix 4 provides more information regarding the SEaM survey.

Chapter 4 provided detail in terms of SEaM data that was used in this thesis (Section Analysis of the SEaM survey 4.7.1). The responses to the particular question presented in Table 7 below relate to students aged 25 – 55 with a low socio-economic group (IMD Q1 and low previous educational qualifications) agreeing that their studies have helped them to develop self-confidence.
My studies have helped me develop my self-confidence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Level 4 Access (%)</th>
<th>Level 4 No Access (%)</th>
<th>Access only</th>
<th>Difference between Level 4 Access and Level 4 No Access (percentage points)</th>
<th>Difference between Level 4 No Access and Access only (percentage points)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My studies have helped me develop</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. SEaM survey data - impact of studying on confidence

The data shows a higher proportion of Level 4 students who had studied an Access module and students who had only just completed the Access module agreeing with the statement (88.4% and 88.1%) compared with Level 4 students who had not studied an Access module (79.4%). While it is difficult to identify from the survey exactly what contributed to their responses, the data support the findings emerging from my research into the impact of the Access programme and the need to possibly embed similar approaches into the core curriculum offer or to encourage more students with low previous educational qualifications and from low socio-economic groups to begin their studies with an Access module.

5.2.4.2 Finding 2 - Tutor/student relationships

The experiences that participants shared regarding the relationship with their tutors as they returned to a formal learning environment was also revealing, particularly as the issue was evident both within the Access programme and on the first year of their undergraduate programme. This suggests that the tutor/student relationship is one that should not be assumed as being positive at whatever level of study. While Gary praised the Access programme, he was less complementary about the relationship he had with his tutor, which he admits related to his approach to challenging situations in the form of humour.

_I didn’t get on very well with the tutor. Now, that’s just one of those things, you know, you can walk in anywhere and not get on with someone. But, I mean, again, cos where I was getting stuck on things I was trying to, you know, do it but I was always trying to make a joke of it and she’s saying “So, why’s that funny then?”._
It is difficult to ascertain exactly why this particular relationship did not work. Gary interpreted it as a clash of personalities and a misunderstanding of the humour that he deployed to deal with difficult situations and as a way of gaining the love that he craved.

*People like humour and sometimes if you’re there and you can be funny and it makes other people laugh and if it’s been nice and funny then all of a sudden everyone loves you because the fact is, you know, you’re a great guy to be around because you make us chuckle. Whereas if you’re miserable, like you know, I’m a big hard man, I can run around the streets, I can do this, I can beat people up, people don’t love you. And to be honest, I wanted to be loved.*

Gary’s experiences suggest that more could be done to enable a better foundation for the relationship between him and his tutor to develop.

Finding a shared interest or characteristic is something which other participants revealed as being important to successful engagement in their studies. Louise experienced this both in applying for her Disabled Students Allowance, where the assessor was also deaf and she felt that he would immediately be able to understand where she might need additional support, and also with her tutor.

*This module, this time, the tutor that I’ve got is on a stick, just as I am, which, I know it sounds really weird, but I thought immediately: he’ll understand my access problems and my mobility problems.*

Louise revealed how open she was in communicating the challenges that she faced not only with her own health issues but also in terms of caring for her disabled daughter and father, irrespective of whether the other party had similar shared experiences. However, it was obvious that there was an additional level of support and understanding where shared experiences were present.

It was, however, evident that some participants are less inclined to contact their tutor proactively, and even less so to reveal some of the personal experiences that might help to create a more collaborative learning environment. Despite the tutoring
models being different on the Access programme and the undergraduate programme, this issue was visible across the two domains. Donna reveals how proactive engagement by her tutors really helps to maintain her enthusiasm and motivation to study, particularly as she is not confident in actively seeking support. However, she felt this may have had a negative aspect when it came to her transition to undergraduate study.

*I think the biggest negative for me with the Access course is that it lulls me into thinking that I would have the same degree of contact with my tutor in the degree course because I don’t. I have almost zero contact with my tutor and I found it really helpful in the Access course and thought well if this is how it is, if this is the sort of help I’m going to get then that’s going to be fantastic but it hasn’t actually happened like that and I think it’s just a case of different tutors do it in a different way but....Also, as I said, I’m not the sort or person to put their hand up. I could probably have a conversation with my tutor - I’ve had a change of tutor because my tutor went on maternity leave -- I could probably have had more contact with my tutor if I asked for it, and perhaps that’s something I need to learn to do rather than, you know, wait for it to be provided.*

For other students, the support they have received from their tutors has been a positive experience. Angela, Julie and Sally spoke of how accessible their tutor was in terms of being able to contact them for advice, particularly in relation to the feedback they received on assignments. This perspective was backed up by the conversation with tutors who teach on both the Access programme and other modules throughout the undergraduate programme.

Tutor Nicole spoke about how initial conversations with her students helped to establish preferred communication channels which then led to a better understanding of the particular circumstances of the students within her cohort. While she encourages students to share anxieties through the preferred communication channels, and regularly posts words of support and encouragement onto forums, she acknowledges that some students need to be proactive in their
contact with her. Tutor Phil also highlighted that some tutors rely on their students to contact them if they need additional support, rather than them proactively making contact.

Interestingly, when asked questions regarding differences between students who had undertaken an Access module prior to their studies and other students, Tutor Nicole talked about their proactivity in terms of contacting her if they were having difficulties, something she suggested students on the undergraduate programme who had not studied on the Access programme, were less likely to do.

For participants like Jen, Tutor Nicole’s approach and that suggested by Tutor Phil would be welcomed, as she felt more comfortable progressing through her studies independently while knowing that she was able to call upon her tutor for support if needed. In this respect, although Jen acknowledges that the telephone tutoring model on Access was preferred over any face-to-face engagement, the regularity of the contact exacerbated the anxieties she had developed from her school experience. She acknowledges the positive impact of the reassurance that her tutors provided her but reflects that she just needs somebody to explain what she needs to do and to reinforce that she can do it, primarily through email communications, and then generally, as she put it: ‘I would rather be left alone’.

Tutor Phil reflected on his own approach to supporting students across the Access and undergraduate programmes. While it was clear that Tutor Phil had developed his own systems for monitoring engagement and progress for his students, it was apparent that they differed for students on the Access programme compared with those on the undergraduate programme. Some of the difference relates to the personal contact through telephone tutorials on Access which he recalled enabled a deeper understanding of the students’ experiences. Some of it related to the personal approach adopted by the tutor. Tutor Phil acknowledges that he has been a tutor for a long time and questioned whether newer tutors are appropriately inducted in terms of ensuring support is offered to those students most in need. He did suggest, however, that the contact points embedded within undergraduate modules are adequate.
There really isn’t kind of an awful lot of guidance about communicating with your tutor group between those [timetabled] points. And if you left it to those points, to be quite frank, there’s quite enough in there that, you know, you would be communicating in some forum by some method fairly frequently.

Participants in my research revealed differing perspectives in relation to the tutor support on both the Access and undergraduate programmes, expressing similar views in terms of whether the support they received was timely, effective and relevant. Tutor Nicole’s and Tutor Phil’s approaches are likely to be influenced by the fact that they tutor on both the Access and undergraduate programmes. A conversation with Tutor Rachel who teaches only on the undergraduate programme reveals additional insight into tutor support for the mixed experiences of participants. Although outside the scope of this research, tutors who tutor exclusively on other undergraduate modules may offer alternative perspectives to the relationship between them and their students in relation to the type of support they provide and that which students request. Similarly, and again not within scope of my study, subject differences may also impact upon the level of support students require. However, there was no suggestion by Tutor Phil, Nicole or Rachel that subject differences had an impact on the support required.

The discussion with Tutor Nicole revealed some disparities between what the students were reporting and her own perspective in relation to the support offered on the undergraduate programme. Tutor Nicole’s view reflects the position of Tutors Phil and Rachel who appeared to go beyond the contracted level of support expected of tutors, but suggests, as does Tutor Phil, that the timetabled communications are an effective means for support without any additional interventions. This viewpoint is not shared by participants in my research which may be as a result of them coming in through the Access route. Students suggest that the level of support from tutors is not consistent in terms of maintaining confidence levels, over and above academic matters.

Louise’s comments relate to the level of personal support alluded to above which she felt she received as she returned to learning and which was more aligned to the type
of support that colleagues within the Student Support Teams were often involved in providing.

[Last year my tutor was very supportive ... I would tell him "Look, I'm sorry, my daughter's got an operation, I'm not concentrating"... I didn't feel embarrassed about mentioning the fact that my mental health, which is generalised anxiety disorder, could become overloaded.

However, this support was not replicated as she progressed through her studies, and Louise clearly articulates how this might impact students in terms of their continuation.

I don't feel as supported, I suppose, as last year, cos I don't get phone calls to see how things are going. Last year you might have got a phone call from a careers person ... I'm not expecting that, I just think that maybe it would be something that would be nice for students to get once every three months. ... Because some people have to have it brought out of them, you know. And it might stop some people from giving up in the early times, in those early weeks, that bit of support.

Melanie’s response echoes Louise’s experience in terms of the lack of ongoing support she receives from her current tutor.

There's like next to no support whatsoever from my tutor. I've asked questions and not got answers. I've asked for constructive criticism and just got copy and pasted the same feedback so I don't even bother asking anything of them.

Melanie

It is apparent that this level of support is not consistent among tutors, although participants who studied on the Access programme report it more often. The challenge seems to lie in how issues that might need more personalised support are identified, as some participants felt unwilling or unable to speak directly to their tutor, and were more comfortable speaking with an educational advisor. Donna
shared an experience which indicated that if students are not displaying any signs that they might need additional support, the tutor is more likely to focus their attention on students who are more obviously struggling. Educational advisers also provide an additional source of learning support for many students, and conversations with participants suggested that they felt they could not approach their tutor for this type of support. This observation relates to notions of the power-relation between student and tutor, which several participants in my research experienced during their time in compulsory education.

The discussion with educational advisers provided them with an opportunity for reflection on their role and their ability to deal with the situations that arose which they all believed they were equipped to deal with as a result of their professional training. However, they also raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of relying on students to contact them proactively.

I think the first barrier is cos we’re distance learning we can’t pick up on any kind of social cues that you may pick up in a face-to-face [meeting] that a student is struggling. So, we’re completely dependent on students actively telling us that they’re struggling, that they’re lacking in confidence, and that is so, so hard for a mature student to do, to actively pick up the phone and to send an email.

This challenges some of the traditional assumptions made about adult learners that relate to them being autonomous, proactive learners, which potentially requires alternative approaches to support. This was a particular theme within the conversations with participants, relating specifically to the pedagogical model adopted by the OU and its conduciveness to supporting adult learners returning to formal learning.

Feedback on assignments and the support received in tutorials were other areas where the relationship between tutor and student was highlighted in participant stories. This was particularly prevalent where participants had more than one tutor during the academic year, often because of illness or other personal reasons. Donna, who was aware that she would be swapping tutors mid-year, explained that she
didn’t have the emotional buy-in with her first tutor because she knew she would be getting a new one part-way through the course. However, the transition between the old and new tutor was not well handled, as she explains:

I went to a day tutorial at the weekend and she [tutor] was there and she didn't even know that I was one of her tutor group. So - she made no effort to look at the list of students, there were only 16 of us, and see if any of them were part of the group that had moved over to her. So that’s a bit of a negative experience for me.

The experiences of the participants in my research reveal the individuality of participant experiences and preferences in terms of the type and level of support participants want, expect and receive.

5.2.4.3 Finding 3 - Assessment feedback

Participant stories also reveal mixed accounts of assessment, specifically around the feedback received from their tutors. While some participants received feedback constructively, others gave the sense that feedback needed to be more formative to enable students to develop their skills and to enable continuous improvement. Melanie and Gary both spoke about the different levels of support they felt they received on their first undergraduate module. Melanie mentioned specifically the feedback received on assignments, which she considered not to be very informative. This contrasts with Julie, who found the feedback transparent and easy to understand.

Participants like Sally were able to ‘take it on the chin and move on’, whereas participants like Lee sometimes struggled with low marks and what he perceived as inadequate or harsh feedback.

I had a bit of a knock on my confidence the other day. My [tutor-marked assignment] TMA02, I don’t know what happened there, I got forty per cent, and that really knocked the feet out from underneath me. I’m a bit worried now because of that last assignment being forty per cent, like I said, it’s knocked my confidence a bit. And I have really tried to go to town on this one
and be focused and that, but at the same time I'm sitting there now and worrying.

Lee’s experience was partly due to a change in tutors, and reflects differences in tutoring styles, grading practice and approaches which students in his situation have to accommodate. His experience may also suggest the need for additional academic skills support. Freddie’s experience relates to Lee’s as he explained how different tutors expected different referencing styles, despite him believing that he was following the guidance that had been provided. While students like Sally may be able to brush off some of these discrepancies, other students find that contradictions in feedback between tutors have the potential to undermine their confidence and create additional levels of anxiety, particularly if the tutor does not respond to student contact. Should this continue, it has the potential to erode the self-confidence that they have built since leaving school and returning to study. The situation was slightly different for Donna, as she received good feedback and a reasonably good mark but could not understand where she had dropped marks as the feedback was all positive. This meant that the feedback did not contribute to her ability to improve because she did not know what she needed to do to improve her score.

Because in my last essay that she actually marked I didn’t really get any negative comments, I think there was one comment about not, I hadn’t given an alternative argument for something. But I dropped 20 points somewhere along the way and it would be helpful to me to know where that happened, you know, where do I make the improvement.

In her recollections, Lesley suggested the need for better guidance in terms of expectations at the beginning of the course, as she dropped marks for something that she wasn’t aware that she would be marked on. Although she acknowledges that individuals learn from their mistakes, there was clearly a sense that if she had known she would be marked down on this particular issue, she would have avoided doing it. Similarly, Donna was critical of a lack of feedback on the last assignment on the Access module because she felt that receiving a low mark could cause some students not to continue their studies.
It is evident that it is difficult to separate participants’ relationships with their tutors in relation to general on-course support and specific assessment feedback, and that the experiences explored in Finding 2 and Finding 3 are interrelated.

Some participants also reflected on the need for clearer study skills development, particularly in relation to essay writing and planning, presenting an argument, and academic writing. Lesley referred to the challenge she faced in relation to asking her tutor for specific support rather than more general academic help. She felt that the level of contact with her tutor was a shock as she progressed to her undergraduate module and that the tutor was very reluctant to provide more specific support which she felt was because the tutor was unwilling to discuss aspects of an assignment.

*And I don’t think there is enough of a link with the tutor now to be able to discuss things like that because if I’ve sort of asked them it’s just ‘Oh no, no, you’re not going to ask me something about the question?’ and you think ‘No, no, no’ and then the conversation seems to end there.*

It was clear that Lesley still lacked confidence when it came to assessment, and she refers to not having an academic background as the reason. She has developed her own solutions of reading, re-reading and reading again key texts and assignment questions, but despite having undertaken the Access module, she still feels uncomfortable within the ‘academic space’. She was clear that she did not expect the tutor to tell her the answer to the question, but that a little bit of additional guidance and support was needed. Additional proactive support to assist students like Lesley with their academic writing would therefore be beneficial.

**5.2.4.4 Finding 4 - Engagement with the learning environment**

Many of the participants commented that the OU gave them an opportunity to return to learning not afforded to them by other more traditional face-to-face HE environments. This supports arguments suggesting that distance learning removes the barriers for many students to engage with education (Keegan, 1998). However, the mix of responses in terms of the level of engagement with different aspects of the learning environment reinforces arguments that suggest adult learners are not an homogeneous group, therefore requiring a mix of approaches to enable them to
engage successfully with HE. Adopting a blended approach to learning which includes face-to-face, online, synchronous and asynchronous environments is likely to provide an effective response particularly as the world emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, and is one which the case study institution delivers. This is likely to be relevant to a wider group of students, beyond those within which this research study are positioned.

The blended approach adopted by the OU includes print-based and online delivery of module content as well as access to online tutorials, online forums and face-to-face tutorials. The accounts that participants provided about their study experience primarily focused on tutorials and forums, suggesting that participants were generally happy with the overarching pedagogic model of blended learning.

5.2.4.4.1 Engagement with forums and tutorials

Previous experiences of education, primarily aligned with issues of confidence, play a significant part in participants’ engagement with the different tutorial delivery methods. Several participants revealed their anxieties about engaging with online forums and tutorials. From a negative point of view, the main comments related to:

- fear of looking stupid, either when asking questions or when contributing to discussions (orally and within chat boxes)
- barriers created by technology.

Interestingly, Lee and Freddie both spoke about not being able to attend synchronous online tutorials due to existing commitments.

Lee found engagement with online tutorials challenging, not just as a result of his position as an adult learner but also as a result of his previous experiences of education, during which the teacher and his peers reinforced his anxieties relating to his reading and writing. As a result, any situation where Lee is expected to make a contribution in a group is likely to trigger anxiety. Generally, anxieties like this are likely to be evident in tutor/student interactions if regular communication to reinforce confidence is not maintained between the tutor and student. Maureen also struggled with online tutorials and forums from a technological and identity perspective. She spoke about how she enjoyed attending face-to-face tutorials but struggled with the technology for online tutorials, and therefore did not engage with
them. Another reason that she did not engage with forums was because she perceived them as being for younger students. On the other hand, Donna perceived the online tutorials to be for those students who were unable to access face-to-face tutorials, particularly disabled students, rather than them being part of the pedagogical model.

From a positive point of view, participants revealed that:

- the structured environment of forums and tutorials enabled more opportunity to engage in the discussion and for the tutor to respond to questions
- anonymity helped some participants to overcome their anxieties and fears.

Online participation was a particularly positive experience for Jill. In the extract below, she reflects on her own learning style in terms of the ability to take her time and reflect on the conversation being held, particularly if sessions were recorded.

I feel like I can study at my own time. I’m the kind of person that I have to read it and like understand everything to get it in. So, like, I feel like in uni, like, the slides will go so quickly that I haven’t written anything down or like I don’t understand it and then I get frustrated and feel like I’m not doing as I should be performing.

The benefit of online tutorials allowing for anonymity helped several participants to overcome their anxieties and fears. These fears are particularly pertinent in a face-to-face environment, and for many, reflect their past experiences of education. Sally explains this benefit below:

I love it when they put an anonymous board up and you can either type or write here and it will just appear on there so, you know, like you don’t know who’s written any of it. I think that gives the people that are lacking in confidence, don’t want to feel stupid, it gives them a platform to be able to put forward things without knowing that nobody can identify them and say, “Oh that’s stupid”.
For these students, because they are not identifiable and can shelter behind their computer, the online tutorial approach enables them to engage effectively with their tutor and other students without having to compete for their voice to be heard and without fear of looking stupid. However, this benefit is likely to be reliant on the tutor’s ability to provide an effective, collaborative and supportive environment in a way that encourages active participation by everyone.

While online tutorials provide formal opportunities to engage with other students, online forums provide a wider network that is more informal in nature. In terms of negative experiences of online forums, some of the issues were similar to those that students spoke about in relation to online tutorials, e.g., fear of looking stupid. Miles reflects on feeling out of his depth within the forums. Although he did post within them, he revealed the level of anxiety he felt when doing so. Miles’s comments reflect the ‘imposter syndrome’ literature where he felt alien within the HE environment and that his contributions were less valid than other students (Chapman, 2017). Louise’s experience is similar in some part to Miles’s anxieties, but her concerns were more in relation to making her comments public and fearing that they might be misconstrued. So, although she was comfortable in engaging with students online on a one-to-one basis, she was less comfortable within an online forum environment.

Amanda and Lindsey both spoke about how they did not proactively contribute to the forums but were observers in reading other people’s comments which helped them get a better understanding of some of the issues that were being discussed. Occasionally, they would comment on a post but this would be more as a way of reinforcing somebody else’s thinking, rather than putting their own ideas forward.

*I feel like anything I’ve got to say is a bit obvious. So, I like going on and sort of commenting on other people’s stuff and, you know, making sure that I’m kind of, I don’t know, saying “Well that was interesting” or “That was good” and … interacting with people in that way but I’m not very good at putting up my own thoughts.*

Jill spoke of the positive aspects of the online environment, as she felt it enabled her to reflect and absorb the content, which was often presented too quickly for her in a
face-to-face environment. This speaks to the approaches that she has developed to enable her to overcome some of her confidence issues in terms of reading, re-reading and reading again to ensure she has grasped exactly what is required of her.

For other participants in the research, the online environment provided the perfect opportunity to engage with other students in a safe and non-threatening way. Adam felt the forums provided positive reinforcement of his thinking, and he was not anxious about the posts that he wrote, even if he perceived some of them to be simple. Adam reveals that he felt comfortable with posting into the forum because he viewed it as a space dominated by the students who were his peers, rather than by a tutor who holds the balance of power.

Adam explains that the online environment provides a level of anonymity that enables him to post and respond to questions without the fear of looking silly. This contrasts with Lee's experience, and thus demonstrates the heterogeneity of adult learners and their needs. Alison also suggests that the online environment enables equality of opportunity to participate, which face-to-face environments do not.

Previous experiences of education have left many of the participants in my study with insecurities about being in a classroom-type environment. Some participants mentioned that these insecurities also played out in face-to-face environments where certain students dominated the conversation, leaving less confident students struggling to find the nerve to speak up.

5.2.4.5 Analysis of the SEaM survey in relation to tutor support

Table 8 highlights responses to the SEaM survey questions that are relevant to the findings presented in the sections above. The questions asked related to opportunities to attend tutorials, contact with tutors and the effectiveness of feedback on assessed tasks.
### Table 8. SEaM survey – questions relating to tutor support and feedback

Comparing students who had completed a Level 4 module but had not undertaken an Access module with those who had taken an Access module reveals that the latter were less likely to agree with all statements apart from ‘my tutor used a friendly/personal tone in feedback on my assessed tasks’. Comparing the responses of students who completed the survey following an Access module with the responses of those who had just completed a Level 4 module without having...
previously taken an Access module reveals that Access students are more likely to agree with the statements than Level 4 students. There was a small difference in responses to the statement regarding whether a student could get in touch with their tutor when necessary, with Access students slightly less likely to agree with the statement. This may be due to the structured contact with tutors on a monthly one-to-one basis within the Access programme.

The SEaM survey responses resonate with some of the findings from the qualitative data analysis in relation to the experiences of participants as they progress from their Access module, particularly with regard to the relationship they had with their tutor and the level of support that they received. While the data do not provide the reasons behind the responses, they are useful as a way of triangulating the findings emerging from my research.

5.2.4.6 Summary – experience of the return to formal learning
The experiences of participants as they return to a formal learning environment have been reported in this section. The findings raise issues around the role of the tutor in offering pastoral and academic support, and the need for this to be available as students progress through their studies. There is clearly evidence that the needs of the participants within the research are personal and individual, which in turn impacts on how they seek and receive support from their tutors and fellow students.

The experiences that participants have shared do suggest that pastoral, academic and personal development support is available across the different areas of the University business. However, whether students can access the support is dependent upon several things:

- how confident and proactive a student is to seek help
- how proactive a tutor is in reaching out
- how receptive a student is to tutor communications
- how students connect with their tutors and fellow students
- how the wider expectations of study are communicated.

The findings from this section, therefore, suggest that academic and pastoral support are inconsistent, leaving some students exposed to anxieties as a result of their previous educational experiences. The data suggest that the way participants engage
with different modes of learning and the extent to which they engage, is often a result of their previous educational experiences and not just down to personal preference.

**Chapter summary**

This chapter has presented the main findings from the 23 interviews undertaken with adult learners returning to formal learning within the case study institution. The content of the conversations with participants enables deeper insight into the unique and diverse experiences of the participants involved in my research, and these are supported by evidence from the perspective of tutors, educational advisers and a policymaker. Although the sample criteria within existing institutional data are not perfectly aligned to the criteria used within my participation sample, the analysis does provide an additional lens through which to view participant stories.

The diversity within participant stories is clearly evident in terms of how they experience their return to the formal learning environment and their subsequent engagement as they progress through their learning journey. Their recollections reveal the extent to which their previous experiences of education impact on how they now engage with learning within an HE environment, and this can affect the transformative learning process. Their learning experience is influenced by:

- general confidence
- academic confidence
- engagement with the tutor
- engagement with other students through forums and tutorials
- the assessment feedback they receive and their response to it.

These themes are pivotal to the discussions in Chapter 6.
Chapter 6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings from Chapter 5 in response to the research question ‘to what extent do approaches to widening participation effectively meet the needs of adults learners returning to formal learning’. This question is being explored through a sub-set of questions:

1. How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?

2. How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?

The discussion draws upon the main themes that emerged in the findings chapter and provides an analysis of them in response to the research questions above, framed within the literature that was reviewed in Chapter 2.

First, the chapter will discuss the findings of the research which support arguments in relation to the heterogeneity of adult learners and how previous experiences of learning impact on adults as they return to formal learning (Michie, Glachan and Bray 2001; Waller, 2006; Askham, 2008; Goodchild, 2017). It will explore how participants demonstrate a desire to learn not only as they return to learning but also during their compulsory education, despite poor experiences. This aligns with literature on lifelong learning, particularly how it is perceived as either a continuum or a dichotomy (Schuller and Watson, 2009; Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011; Million Plus and NUS, 2012) within compulsory education. The chapter makes reference to the emancipatory benefits of lifelong learning and how for some the negative perceptions of their previous educational experience are carried with them as they reengage in formal learning, an argument made by Tight (1998).

Building on these findings the chapter will then explore how the findings support the need for individualised learning that reflects the particular nuances of adult learners.
as they return to learning, particularly a recognition that the transformative benefits of learning are not experienced at the same time for all adult learners. The chapter proceeds to a discussion of the themes which focus on the relationship with the tutor and other students. It relates current experiences to previous experiences of formal education, revealing similarities in how these relationships are enacted. The chapter concludes with a summary which proposes a holistic view of the experiences of adult learners as they return to learning, recognising the individuality of their experiences and how they impact on them as they continue their HE journey.

6.2 Adult learners are not homogeneous

The findings from my research support arguments that suggest adult learners are not an homogeneous group (Waller, 2006; Butcher, 2015b; Goodchild, 2017). Previous research makes reference to poor previous experiences of education and the impact it has on adult learners, specifically those who have been out of formal education for some time (Cross, 1981; Merrill, 2004; Askham, 2008; McAllister, 2010). The focus of this literature is predominantly on confidence in academic ability and study skills. My research contributes new knowledge by placing adult and lifelong learning within the context of widening participation, not only in terms of outreach but also in relation to the pedagogical approaches experienced by adult learners as they progress through their studies, beyond widening participation initiatives. This differs from the existing literature which has a tendency to focus upon the multiple identities that adult learners present and the impact this has on them as they re-engage in a formal learning environment (Askham, 2008; Butcher, 2015b; Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015). There is a recognition in this literature that many adults return to formal learning with anxieties brought about as a result of their previous experiences of education and their lack of engagement with formal learning thereafter (McAllister, 1998; Askham, 2008; Goodchild, 2017). However, there is often a perceived failure in HE to recognise and address such anxieties which go beyond simply a lack of academic confidence and study skills.

In order to generate the transformative benefits of learning (Mezirow, 1991) environments need to be low-risk, safe and non-threatening (Cross, 1981). The experiences that participants recalled suggest whilst this was generally positive, more could be done to ensure a continuation of approaches associated with widening
participation. This would support ongoing development or maintenance of confidence levels, which may easily be impacted by a poor experience. The participants in my research demonstrate the individuality of the impact of the HE study experience, influenced by previous educational experiences in all their guises. A reframing and rearticulation of teaching and the delivery of learning may be required to respond to this individuality, breaking down the barriers that some adult learners have previously experienced with learning and which have remained with them as they re-engage. The continued provision of blended learning would not only support a more personalised approach to learning, known to be effective within the HE environment (Cross, 1981) but would enable students’ anxieties to be managed more appropriately, enabling them to drive their own learning requirements through a range of options available, rather than having them imposed upon them. In doing so, the transformative power of learning could be individualised and enhanced within a safe environment and at a pace appropriate to the individual student.

6.3 Desire to learn

It was clear from the accounts given by participants during their interviews, that despite differences in their perceived academic ability and academic positioning most of them reported a desire to learn during and immediately after their compulsory education, whether they completed it or not. This is evidenced through:

- Gary’s experience as he maintained his education whilst being homeless
- Lee as he demonstrated a desire to work hard and used other resources, such as his parents, to supplement his learning
- Jen, Kirsty, Liz, Donna and Jill who all went to college despite poor experiences
- Julie as she returned to school to complete her SATS after initially withdrawing
- Adam as he would have welcomed alternative educational opportunities
- Angela, Louise and Freddie who embarked on a Youth Training Scheme/apprenticeship
- Jane, Mya, Sally, Melanie and Maureen who always had the desire to go to university just not the opportunity
• Miles and John who engaged in compulsory education and achieved what they needed but did not progress their formal learning beyond
• Lindsey who completed her A Levels
• Lesley who always thought she could have done more.

However, a lack of recognition of individual motivations, challenges and interests contributed to several participants’ discontinuation of formal learning. This was specifically in relation to a lack of teacher support to encourage them to fulfil their potential, either because they were not considered to be in need of additional support (the academically invisible pupils) or because their motivations and aspirations did not align to those of the school (academic misalignment). This shows how individual educational experiences and structural/sector-level pressures interact, in some cases to the disadvantage of the pupil. Widening participation to HE therefore potentially contributes to the learning divide (Sargant et al., 1997), which increases as individuals who do not participate fall further behind. This is exacerbated when learning in the younger years of adulthood is prioritised, evidenced by fewer opportunities to engage in learning for self-development as an older adult, because funding and curriculum is geared towards vocational and skills-based courses (Department for Education, 2019a). Lifelong learning in this sense is a misnomer unless the rhetoric can be changed to one where all learning is valued equally and decisions to engage in learning beyond compulsory education are not restricted to immediate progression to HE. Reframing of the rhetoric whereby participation in HE is dispersed throughout the life-course, could help overcome some of the issues that have caused funding policy changes, as unsustainable levels of participation of younger students in HE continue.

Perspectives that frame lifelong learning as a continuum between compulsory and post-compulsory education are likely to be more helpful in this respect (Sharifi, Soleimani and Jafarigohar, 2017; Illeris, 2018; Loeng and Omwami, 2018), presenting adult learning more positively rather than to make up for past failings. (Tight, 1998; OFS, 2020c), reinforced by language which refers to ‘poor previous educational experiences’ (Tight, 1998; Crossan et al., 2003; Waller, 2006; Askham, 2008).
Helping school-aged children to understand that formal learning is an option in adulthood, would also serve to overcome some of the issues experienced by participants in my research, particularly around the barriers they faced as they moved beyond compulsory education and the perspectives they hold that they were not good enough. The fall-out from this experience is that some adult learners, as they return to formal learning, are less confident in their academic ability. Approaches to widening participation to HE for adult learners aim to overcome this but other pedagogical factors, as adult learners continue through their studies have the potential to undo the generally positive outcomes of initial entry.

As well as approaches to outreach delivered in the name of widening participation, advice and guidance could be offered in terms of alternative pathways. These pathways could still be framed within the concept of encouraging more people to enter HE, but within the broader context of lifelong learning, which suggests engagement in HE should not only happen to school leavers. Knowing that progression to university is not the only option at 18, but that returning to learning in years ahead is a realistic possibility, is integral to a successful learning journey through the life-course. This would not be a small undertaking, given that there are many influences on an individual in terms of learning trajectories (Gorard and Smith, 2006; Biesta, 2008; Tuckett and Field, 2016). However, aligning school advice with current widening participation practices could offer an additional layer of influence for future learning.

Approaches that support the development of confidence, a key characteristic of adult learners (McAllister, 2010), and encourage students to challenge and express opinions (Freire, 1972) are embedded within the introductory programme at the case study institution, at Level 4 but more specifically within its Level 0 Access programme (OFFA, 2017). Despite the Access Programme and the introductory Level 4 modules at the OU being designed to be developmental in nature, the experiences recalled by participants in my research suggest a more sustained developmental programme might be required. This would support transformative learning at a slower pace, recognising that patterns of non-participation (Gorard and Smith, 2006) will be harder to overcome for some students. This is reflective of the accounts that participants gave as they recalled their journey back into formal education, with some
like Gary making several attempts, over a significant period of time, at re-engaging in different types of learning before making the decision to embark on HE study. Even this was not a straightforward activity, with several conversations being held with advisors at the University and with his partner, prior to deciding the best course of study for him. Maureen had a similar experience, which reinforces the need for opportunities to be made available at any given point in time to respond to adult needs (Cross, 1981). This supports notions of life-wide as well as lifelong learning (Billet, 2017) in the sense that opportunities should be made available within formal, informal and non-formal contexts as well as throughout an individual’s life (Cross, 1981). Within a formal learning context, good support and guidance at the point of enquiry is, therefore, vital to ensure the most appropriate study route is chosen, which may not necessarily be registration on an undergraduate qualification in the first instance.

The evidence from participant interviews suggests that having different options available in the form of basic skills courses, on-the-job training and non-formal courses, was something many participants considered to be important in their journey to returning to the formal learning environment. The inter-disciplinary nature within the case study’s Access programmes, expands the concept of choice, broadening the scope of learning beyond what are often considered by policymakers to be high value courses. As suggested by Callender (2015), Spellman (2015) and Scott (2015) such courses tend to attract higher participation, are less expensive to deliver, and generate more revenue. Providers are, therefore, understandably likely to prioritise those courses, as their funding is reduced as a result of government decisions to focus on courses that are deemed more beneficial to meet economic needs and increase global competition.

Although many participants in my research were in compulsory education prior to more recent widening participation policy, their experiences are helpful in influencing current approaches to widening participation to HE for adult learners, as they become a particular focus within Access and Participation Plan Guidance (OFS, 2019b). The narrow focus of guidance and opportunity received by participants during compulsory education when career advice was often aligned to particular subject specialisms or career pathways is as relevant now as it was then and offers
useful insight to inform widening participation practice within the context of lifelong learning. It runs counter to the widening participation message which historically has focused on aspiration-raising and attainment with a view to progressing directly to HE. For the participants in my study, such a narrow focus would do nothing to support them in the aspirations that they did have, which were not aligned with those of their school. In the case of Miles and Gary, better advice may have supported them along a different pathway, but neither of them were provided with options during their compulsory education. Miles’s choices were the military or university, and Gary’s recollections were that the priority of the school was to ensure that pupils went on to university. As a result, both Miles and Gary drifted into their working lives. This demonstrates that, despite all participants revealing some desire to learn during their compulsory education, this was not always the journey on which they embarked.

My data supports Rainford (2021)’s assertion that the social and cultural structures within which education is embedded can create the barriers to success, particularly if they do not align with individual aspirations. Opportunities afforded to adult learners returning to formal learning which are more individualised, could address some of these issues. Fixation on one particular pathway at a given point in time reduces the opportunities to choose a pathway that aligns with individual ambitions and aspirations, rather than those of the school or policymakers. Broadening opportunities, as participants suggest, is likely to result in potentially better outcomes and contribute to overcoming many of the anxieties that they revealed as a result of feeling ignored, unsupported and not being pushed during compulsory education.

The stories that participants told and the different learning trajectories that they followed clearly support the models of learning through the life-course endorsed by Biesta (2008), Schuller and Watson (2009), and Illeris (2017). They also reflect Tuckett’s findings (2017) in relation to the impact that small pieces of learning can have on an individual’s future learning pathway. My research however provides additional insight to these perspectives by suggesting that this process is not experienced equally by participants, despite them all coming through a dedicated widening participation programme. Whilst different forms of adult education can act as a springboard for adult learners to progress to other formal education, including
HE, it is possible that previous educational experiences will influence their HE experience. A learning environment that helps to overcome these ongoing challenges and which positively reinforces the concept of lifelong learning could be beneficial. Rather than the reduction in opportunities to engage in learning, witnessed across the adult education sector (Tuckett, 2018) over many years, more could be done to enable adult learners to take control of their own learning at a time and pace that suits them.

Having the opportunity to engage in different forms of learning as and when required positively impacts on individuals. This resonates with Cross (1981), Biesta (2008) and Tuckett (2016) who all suggest that positive experiences of education encourage future participation. Participation is also influenced by peers, family and friends, either positively or negatively (Tuckett and Field, 2016). Positive experiences encountered by participants in post-compulsory education led them (eventually) to re-engage in formal learning in the form of studying with the case study institution.

The journey towards re-engaging in formal education for many participants has involved overcoming what was perceived as negative experience of school, through the support of peers, friends and family, as well as more positive experiences of other types of learning. Opportunities to engage in other forms of learning therefore have the potential to overcome negative experiences of previous education, an argument made by Cross (1981). She suggests that as well as formal opportunities to engage in learning, non-formal opportunities through avenues like television programmes and non-accredited courses, plant the seed for future, more formal learning to occur. The accounts provided by participants suggest the rates at which adult learners return to formal learning are likely to differ, reflecting the individualised nature of learning throughout the life-course.

**6.4 The individualised nature of learning**

In accordance with the heterogeneous nature of adult learners, the learning trajectories that participants in my research displayed are particular to the individual, as is the pace at which transformative learning takes place. For some, engagement in formal learning and overcoming negative past experiences occurred much earlier than for others. In some cases, as in that of Louise and Liz, it was only in retirement
that the opportunity to reengage was possible. Although this will still bring transformative benefits, earlier opportunity could potentially have had a much wider impact on their lives and their contribution to society more generally. Participants in my research are in many ways the lucky ones, many having experienced other forms of learning following post-compulsory education but making it through some negative experiences to study at the case-study institution, influenced through some negative experiences of learning and the support of others. Opportunities to reengage in learning should be made available throughout the life-course to respond to the needs of adult learners at different points of their lives. Learning opportunities which span formal, non-formal and informal domains, have the potential to bring transformative benefits impacting all parts of life.

This resonates with Schuller and Watson’s (2009) and Illeris’s (2017) concepts of learning through the life-course, with specific phases of learning being needed as individuals progress from childhood through to adulthood and maturity. While these phases of learning are helpful in determining how adults may engage in learning for different purposes as they transition through life, the findings from the participant interviews in fact support Sheehy (2006) who suggested that there is no longer a linear trajectory of learning needs due to changing gender roles, the extension of the period of working life alongside different patterns of work and leisure which are less predictable. Therefore, the findings of this study further support arguments for lifelong learning to be embedded, and acted up, within educational discourse so that it becomes an expectation to engage in learning throughout the life-course, rather than the exception. This may encourage the HE sector to focus more on effective adult education and contribute to promoting a sense of civic responsibility.

It is also clear from participant stories that, while the decision to return to formal learning was transformative in itself, engaging with learning through the Access programme contributed to a sustained level of confidence, despite initial anxieties. This finding supports the arguments relating to the emancipatory benefits of learning which are alluded to within policies but downgraded in practice (Tight, 1998). Even as participants progressed through their studies, the emancipatory and transformative aspects of their experience of learning as they return are evident. There are clearly variations, however, in the extent to which these are consistent
among participants. There is, therefore, potential to erode the initial benefits of learning for some students as they move beyond specific widening participation programmes if the pedagogical models are too far removed from the original experience. This is not to say that students should not be supported to become independent and confident learners, but that the pace at which this happens is likely to differ. This aligns with the earlier discussion in terms of the different learning trajectories that participants took to return to formal learning, and again supports Biesta’s (2008) arguments in relation to different learner types.

Participant stories reveal insights into their past and current experiences of formal education. Beyond issues of confidence in terms of returning to learning, discussed above, there are other similarities in their experiences of compulsory education and returning to formal learning. As they returned to formal learning, there were clearly issues in relation to the tutor/student relationship which mirrored the relationships they had with their teachers when at school. Similarly, relationships with fellow students as participants returned to learning was a theme which echoed their school days in terms of the relationship they had with other pupils. These themes will be discussed in more detail below.

6.5 Relationship with tutor

The experiences of previous education shared by participants reveal that during their compulsory education they felt unsupported by the majority of teachers. This was true not only for participants who struggled academically like Lee and to some extent Gary, but also for those participants who felt that they were not encouraged to reach their full potential (Louise and Melanie), and those whose ambitions were not aligned with the priorities of the school (Miles and Gary). Teacher support, both positive and negative, was also evident in the accounts of many participants who felt that the school or the majority of teachers did not support them pastorally, particularly in relation to the bullying that several of them experienced. In some cases, there were one or two teachers who were reported as supportive, as in the case of Jen and Gary, but more widely, participants’ stories reveal a sense that the school let them down. This was particularly evident in Adam’s account as he felt he had no support either from school or home, and the authorities that got involved were interested only in getting him back to school. Opportunities to engage in other forms of learning may
have been beneficial for Adam in this respect. Issues of tutor support also came through in participant accounts of their experience of returning to formal learning. The tutor support provided in the Access programme at the case study institution is aimed at preventing a repeat of the kind of issues participants experienced with teachers, through personalised, one-to-one, telephone tutorials. The approach aims to prepare students for HE study and equip them with skills to enable them to actively participate in other learning environments and society more broadly. There is therefore an expectation that students who do progress within the formal learning environment will have become confident, fully engaged learners. The experiences of participants on both the Access programme and in their undergraduate studies evoked different reactions, reinforcing the arguments that ‘one size does not fit all’, even on programmes that are designed to be developmental in response to previous educational experiences.

Gary recalls the less-than-positive relationship he had with his Access tutor, a situation opposite to that described by Louise. Establishing a positive relationship between student and tutor is seen by Merrill (2015) as essential in maintaining motivation. This is reinforced through the identification of common experiences and interests between students and tutors as in the case of Louise, who spoke of the fact that her tutor had the same disability as her, and therefore had a better understanding of her academic support needs. Developing a better understanding of the relationships between tutor/teacher and pupil/student is likely to create a more positive learning environment for both. This finding follows Freire (1972) and hooks (1994) in relation to creating a shared identity within the classroom, within which difference can be empowering.

From my professional experience, the tutoring model in undergraduate qualifications at the OU is primarily designed to support the development of study skills rather than pastoral support, associated more with the Access programme. Although, as Tutor Phil and Tutor Nicole’s accounts of their experiences suggest, some element of pastoral support is provided, it is often down to individual tutors and is not the main expectation of the tutor role. Whereas the tutor within the Access programme provides a nurturing and developmental role, one viewed favourably for the majority of the participants, the expectation is that the tutor will become more of a facilitator
of learning as students progress through their studies. From the perspective of Freire (1972) and hooks (1994), the student is also an active participant within the learning environment, a position which the Access programme strives to develop through its focus on confidence-building. This is evident for some of the participants like Julie, Sally and Kirsty, whose initial experience of returning to formal learning is all that is required for their continued engagement in learning. For these participants there is a clear motivation to learn, which has been impacted through their previous educational experience but reignited through their reengagement with the case study institution. This aligns with Biesta’s (2008) arguments that suggest learning for some is embedded within the individual, whereby participation is a long term goal, rather than a quick fix. However, for other participants whose past experiences of compulsory education reveal a need for more academic support, such approaches are likely to be less effective and the time they take to become confident and independent learners may be longer than for others. A continuation of the developmental approach adopted on Access may be required, providing a gentler transition into undergraduate study.

The relationship that participants had with their tutors was also reminiscent of their previous educational experiences in relation to the balance of power. This is a position not advocated in critical pedagogy, where the tutor acts as facilitator and an active participant in learning rather than somebody who imparts their expert knowledge to passive recipients. Many participant recollections of their previous educational experience reflect the banking model described by Freire (1972), which for some has been hard to shake as they return to learning, despite their developing confidence.

Sometimes, as in the case of Gary, the similarities between teachers and tutors relate to personality clashes as well as a misalignment between the perceptions of the role of the teacher/tutor and the perception of the tutor of the role of the student. Gary’s eagerness to participate against a sense of nervousness as an adult (disguised by humour) encompasses the concept of critical pedagogy whereby the teacher/tutor and student are equally active participants of learning. Ensuring all parties involved in the learning process are fully informed and their roles agreed from the beginning could provide a possible solution to this situation. This is an approach adopted on the
Access programme through a reflective learning review and learning plan developed at the beginning of the module. However, this practice is not evident within undergraduate modules.

The differing expectations of the role of the tutor open the opportunity to offer effective support using alternative mechanisms. OU educational advisers spoke about the supportive role that they provide. They acknowledged that this is often different from the support that tutors in general provide, and this difference related primarily to academic content. This kind of support is something that in many cases was not experienced within compulsory education. In only one or two cases did participants talk about additional sources of support which helped them through, and which contributed to their learning experience. The concerns of several participants who felt that the support they received was less than expected, or that they required different types of support, could be addressed by better communication about the support available and more proactive offers of support.

For participants whose school experience left them feeling neglected by the teachers, the support provided by tutors as they returned to formal learning was perceived positively and enabled them to develop the confidence they needed to reengage in learning. Some did not feel this continued as they progressed through their studies, with participants such as Lesley feeling less supported by their tutors as they progressed to their Level 4 module. Some, like Donna, felt cheated by the Access programme because they felt that it had lulled them into a false sense of security. This suggests the need for more consistent tutor support going forward or clear communication as to the support to be expected as students progress.

Participants like Lee, who had a particularly negative experience of compulsory education, had their confidence ignited through exposure to unplanned learning during their time in employment, and the Access programme reinforced and enhanced this. Lee’s vulnerability to having his confidence knocked is evident. Although he spoke confidently and enthusiastically in relation to his OU experience, it was clear that insecurities resurfaced when he received feedback on assignments that he perceived to be harsh. While to some extent Lee’s story demonstrates that he had developed the confidence to challenge his tutor and request more clarification on his assignment, as he awaited a response there was clearly a sense that his
previous educational experience was coming to the fore in terms of the tutor/student relationship. Despite arguments that suggest successful learning encourages further learning (Tuckett and Field, 2016), there is also a need to communicate more effectively the formative nature of assessment and feedback which encourages students to engage in the learning environment, despite perceived failures, in order to develop as a learner. There is also a potential benefit for students like Lee for ‘an undergraduate gradient’ - a slower transition into undergraduate study where the shift to independent learning is more gradual.

Other participants such as Jen, Julie, Kirsty, Miles, Sally, Mya, Jane and Maureen displayed characteristics more aligned with the concept of the focused, determined and enthusiastic adult learner (Griffith, 2021; Hillage et al., 2000). Many of these participants refer to their own innate motivation and confidence which drives them in their studies, which may mean that they require less support than other participants. However, even among this group of participants there is divergence in terms of the support that they feel they need. Jen refers to her learning style as being very independent, with the confidence to reach out to her tutor if she needs to. Similarly, Maureen relies on her own motivation to study. She recalled how she found her own way onto the course and generally keeps herself motivated without the need for additional coaching or mentoring. However, other participants such as Liz, Gary and Lee, appear to require more proactive engagement to maintain their motivation and confidence to keep studying.

The findings, therefore, indicate that the level and type of support required will vary between participants, supporting arguments that suggest the need for a more personalised approach to learning, based on individual need (Mansell and Parkin, 1990), cited in McGivney, 1996). This resonates with the earlier discussion relating to the differing paces at which participants become independent and confident learners, which is likely to be influenced by previous educational experience. Participants who see themselves as lifetime learners are likely to rebound more quickly from their initial experiences, than participants whose previous, less positive experiences of learning were deeply embedded. This shifts the focus away from the assumption that once students have overcome their initial anxieties in returning to formal learning there is no need for any additional support. Tutor allocation,
personalised support and extension of support services become pivotal to ensure that the right level of support is being provided. These observations relate not only to the support provided through the university but also to support from other students - something which some students actively engaged with while others shied away, often as a result of their past educational experiences. It is, therefore, not enough to provide support separately from pedagogical decisions; support should be embedded within pedagogical design and proactively engaged with through the study experience.

6.6 Relationship with other students

A common theme that emerged from the interviews concerned the relationships participants had with their peers during compulsory education, predominantly in the form of bullying but also more generally in relation to how they perceived themselves academically. The experiences that participants shared as they subsequently re-engaged in formal learning have a direct correlation to these previous experiences. Participants were differentiated into three groups in this regard: those who actively engage with other students, those who do not engage at all, and those who passively engage. This finding challenges some of the evidence relating to peer support groups and the positive impact it can have on learning (Gorard, Rees and Fevre, 1999; Tuckett and Field, 2016). I will address this theme for each of the three groups in the sections which follow.

6.6.1 Active engagement

Adam, Sally and Jill all present their experience of engaging with other students at the case study institution positively, despite previous experiences perhaps indicating that they might be more likely to shy away from group tutorials and forums. Adam suffered severe mental health issues during his youth due to bullying but positively engages with other students as he has returned to study. He specifically puts this down to the role of the tutor who continues to support him through his studies and, while admitting he is nervous, really enjoys the opportunity to participate. Previous experiences for Jill were not impacted by the relationships she had with her peers in the same way as Adam, and she articulates a very clear sense of confidence, with some anxiety in terms of her academic abilities. She overcomes this by the confidence she has in herself generally which was reinforced through the Access
programme prior to her Level 4 studies. Sally’s previous experiences and the relationship that she had with her mother as she grew up, suggest that, in a similar way to Adam, she is reluctant to engage with other students. The difference for Sally was her determination when she was younger to move out of home so that she was not under her mother’s influence, a determination that comes through in what she shares of her current study experience. Sally acknowledges that her confidence can sometimes come across as ‘pushy’ in group tutorials but also recognises that dominant students in a group can deter others from speaking up. In these examples, it is difficult to say whether the experiences shared are a direct result of participants’ previous educational experiences or are testament to individual character. However, this cannot be said for participants whose stories reveal a lack of engagement directly as a result of their previous experiences, as can be seen in the next section.

6.6.2 Non-engagement

Gary, Lee, Donna, Lindsey and Amanda reported no engagement with other students in their current studies. For Donna, it was not necessarily her previous experience that contributed to this but more the fact that she feels she has no relationship with the tutor or other students in the tutorials that she attends. This is relevant to both her experience on the Access programme and on her undergraduate module. Tutorials on the undergraduate programme are delivered by a number of tutors, and often not by the module tutor the student would have been allocated at the beginning of their module. They are also delivered online and face to face, and students can decide which mode they wish to engage with and also make choices regarding time and place. Building relationships with the tutors delivering the tutorials and other students in this context is, therefore, challenging although it does provide alternative options if, for whatever reasons, there are issues with their allocated tutor. The relationship with a tutor is likely to be more intense on the Access course than on other modules, as one-to-one tutorials are delivered over the telephone. Participants’ experiences of their tutors are likely to be impacted, positively and negatively, by the different tuition models adopted.

Donna’s lack of engagement within her tutorial sessions is quite similar to her previous experiences of education: she grew up in a rural village where opportunities to engage in further learning were not available. She had to seek out other
opportunities independently, demonstrating a sense of inner motivation and confidence to take the initiative. Donna’s experience echoes the influences on learning referred to by Biesta (2008) and Tuckett and Field (2016) which focus on individual self-efficacy but not so much on supportive peer groups, as Donna is not experiencing that in her current studies. In this instance, the tutor is crucial in ensuring that Donna is effectively supported given that she is not receiving or seeking support from her peers. Without tutor support on her level 4 module, she is reliant on motivating herself to continue - a role that her Access tutor would likely have fulfilled previously due to the regularity of contact embedded within the programme.

For Gary and Lee, their lack of engagement with other students is directly related to their previous experiences at school, during which they recalled facing considerable anxiety when having to read out loud or engage in group activities. This was exacerbated for Lee who also experienced ridicule from his teacher, and the ongoing impact of this is now played out in his relationship with other students. Despite Lindsey’s confidence in her professional position, where interaction with large groups and other professionals is common, her previous educational experience continues to impact on how she engages with others in an academic environment. Again, this suggests that the role of the tutor is crucial in providing the support for students like Lindsey who struggle to reap the benefits of support from other students within the current tutoring model. Students like Lindsey may also benefit from smaller, more personalised and less formal environments such as buddying or peer mentoring. Such approaches may be more effective and less daunting, than formal institution-led initiatives, focussed on working more closely with students on a one-to-one basis with fellow students who have faced similar experiences.

Participants also spoke of other support that they drew on in the form of educational advisors and specialist disability support within the Academic Services team. Participant experiences suggest the need for a broadening and active dissemination of approaches to support students through their journey that go beyond that of the tutor and tutorial groups and forums. Such an approach is likely to support other students who struggle to form relationships with their tutors or other students, perhaps because they are seen as the experts or more intelligent than them.
Non-engagement was also evident in participants who did not actively participate in the forums or tutorials, but passively observed conversations and chats. Although they are not actively participating, these students may still be learning from the conversations and comments that others are making. Amanda, for instance, pointed out that she liked listening to the confident students as they would ask the questions that others were too scared to ask. Similarly, Lindsey, Lee and Gary used comments from others in the chat box to support their learning but did not actively engage themselves.

These experiences clearly relate to notions about the role of the tutor and other students within the learning process discussed in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; Jarvis, 2001; Illeris, 2017) as reviewed in Chapter 2. Mezirow’s theory (1991) has been criticised for excluding external influences on adult learning and presenting the learning process as linear and rational. Combining the approaches to learning developed by, Freire (1972), Mezirow (1991), Jarvis (2006) and Illeris (2017) as detailed in Table 3 (p. 63) supports the argument for a consolidation of the theoretical concepts associated with adult learning. In doing so, an alignment of the many elements of learning theory described would provide a more holistic approach that represents the intricacies of adult learning, presented within this thesis. However, these theories or approaches to adult learning, also fail to recognise some of the nuances that my research study has revealed. These particularly relate to the anxieties of adult learners, not just as they return to learning but as they continue through their learning journey. It is suggested that the adoption of this holistic approach to adult learning be embedded within all pedagogical models and not just within dedicated widening participation programmes.

Several participants also referred to consciously positioning themselves against other students, not just academically but also in relation to their age. This is not directly an impact of their previous educational experiences but is related to how adult learning is presented in terms of second chance learning or to make up for past failures (Tight, 1998; OFS, 2020c). This rhetoric reinforces the feelings shared by Jane, Lindsey and Maureen in relation to how they perceive themselves against other students. Recognition that they bring many life skills to the learning environment, which
younger students do not, could be made more visible and ultimately help to reduce feelings of ‘imposter syndrome’ (Chapman, 2017) in a world where they feel they do not belong. This echoes the research undertaken by Mallman and Lee (2016) which explores the experiences of adult learners within a traditional university setting. The findings of this research suggest that:

- adult learners feel a certain stigma because they are returning to learning having previously ‘failed’
- younger students perceive adult learners as being over-enthusiastic and too keen
- lecturers welcome the maturity that adult learners bring.

Supporting the development of a shared identity amongst student groups as Freire (1972) suggests may eradicate some of the negative connotations and perceptions of the positioning of adult learners within the learning environment and has the potential to draw on the strengths of all students. In turn, this can contribute to creating a more positive learning environment which recognises diversity and empowers all those involved.

6.7 Chapter summary

Findings from this research are that personalisation, flexibility and choice are essential factors in terms of ensuring adult learners returning to formal learning are supported to maintain confidence in their academic abilities as they progress through their studies. The discussion above shows that not only do participants’ previous educational experiences relate to their current situation, but also supports the position that adult learners have heterogeneous characteristics (Waller, 2006; Butcher, 2015b; Goodchild, 2017). Even though these findings are based on interviews with a relatively small number of students, they reveal the uniqueness of every one of their experiences. It is, therefore, likely that interviews with more adult learners returning to formal learning will also reveal different experiences, as suggested by Askham (2008). The research has identified the heterogeneity of students as a result of their past experiences of education and the impact that these experiences have had on their studies with the OU. As participant stories and the discussions with Access students on their visit to the OU confirm, the particular
pedagogical model adopted by the OU undoubtedly enables many students to engage with HE whether they begin with the Access programme or not. It is evident that while the Access programme provides an effective platform from which some students go on to flourish in the undergraduate programme, others would benefit from a continuation of many aspects of the Access model, particularly the style of tutoring and its developmental nature. This suggests the need for an approach that does not assume all adult learners enter HE as autonomous and independent learners whether they have studied on the Access programme or not. Recognising that the pace of transition to becoming independent and autonomous will differ among individuals indicates that developmental approaches should not be confined to Access and introductory programmes but should be ongoing as students progress through their studies.

My research provides additional insight into what adult learners’ past experiences might be and how they affect their experiences as they reengage in a formal learning environment. While the research does not purport to claim any direct causal relationship, there are clearly lessons to be learnt for providers of adult learning based on students’ previous experiences and in relation to traditional widening participation approaches. It is evident that for some adult learners, previous educational experiences have created deeply embedded insecurities which can be overcome as they return to learning, but which can also be reinforced through existing structures. This perception relates back to the power relationship between the teacher and pupil experienced by some participants during their school days, typical of traditional classroom-based pedagogical models. It also relates to the relationship with peers and the extent to which participants engaged with others in the learning environment.

Following this discussion, Chapter 7 will draw conclusions from the overall research and provide a reflection and response to what has been discussed above. It will provide recommendations for action within the case study institution and more broadly for other providers seeking to widen participation to HE for adult learners.
Chapter 7. Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This research set out to explore the extent to which approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning.

Two sub-questions were identified and influenced the literature reviewed, the research design and the data analysis:

1. How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?

2. How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?

This chapter will begin by presenting four pathways to HE which focus on widening participation aimed at school children, through to adulthood. These four pathways are based on the findings from my research and also the knowledge and expertise I possess as an insider-researcher, as presented in the introductory chapter, as a result of the professional space I inhabit from a practitioner and policy perspective. To conclude the section, a concept map provides a graphical summary of the various pathways to HE that this thesis has covered. This will be followed by an explicit response to each of the questions above, drawing upon the findings from my research. Each section will conclude with some recommendations for practice within my own institution, the wider HE sector and policymakers more generally. The final section will respond directly to the main research question ‘to what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners returning to formal learning’
7.2 Widening participation to HE for adult learners

This thesis has provided a holistic view of widening participation to HE for adult learners within the theoretical framework of transformative learning and relating the experiences of adult learners within the case study institution against literature on adult learning, lifelong learning and widening participation. The four pathways presented below have been developed from the experiences of participants within these contexts and inform the recommendations contained in Section 7.7.

7.2.1 Pathway 1

Pathway 1 presents the ideal pathway to HE based on traditional approaches to widening participation, aimed at school-leavers. It suggests a linear route into HE and the positive impact that widening participation initiatives have made. It shows the preferred pathway is progression to A levels in years 12 and 13 or equivalent, either within the school environment or FE, through a focus on raising aspirations and improving attainment for pupils in years 7 to 11. Subsequent outreach at this stage ideally results in students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds progressing to HE and securing graduate level employment. This approach however, fails to meet the needs of the pupils (represented by the participants within my research) who considered themselves to be academically invisible and misaligned aspirationally. Traditional approaches to widening participation also fail to address issues of academic insecurity brought about by the teaching environment and for some, the total withdrawal from education. The research presented in this thesis suggests a fresh and timely approach is required to ensure their needs are met, as no adult over 35 will have experienced the outreach activities aimed at school children, embedded within institutional widening participation programmes.

7.2.2 Pathway 2

Pathway 2 develops from the position of Pathway 1 where the needs of pupils who fall outside of the traditional widening participation cohort are not being met. For some, particularly those referred to as lifetime or transitional learners (Gorard and Smith, 2006) alternative routes into formal education in the form of FE are taken. This creates a touch point for the second stage of widening participation to be enacted, aimed at 16–17-year-olds and therefore not yet within the realms of widening
participation for adults. The desired outcome at this stage is, as with Pathway 1, progress to HE and graduate employment and follows a similar linear path, impacted by widening participation initiatives. This approach, whilst scoops up the motivated learners, fails to meet the needs of some transitional learners as well as those delayed and non-participative learners (Gorard and Smith, 2006) who disengaged in learning within compulsory education. For some participants in my research, FE did not provide the opportunities to progress to HE, possibly as there was less of an expectation of progression to HE from FE. Opportunities at this stage could be progression into employment, unemployment and for some, based on the accounts of some participants in my research, total withdrawal from society.

7.2.3 Pathway 3

Pathway 3 epitomises the focus of the research in this thesis, widening participation to HE for adult learners. It focuses on both young adults leaving compulsory education to older adults who have had many years out of formal education. For some, as participants in my research suggest, learning is always like to happen, although when it will happen will be determined by their personal circumstances. For others learning is not on the radar. Widening participation to adults in this pathway is therefore perhaps opportunistic as reaching adults at a point of a life changing event or life-stage cannot be predicted. Similarly, those adults who emerge from their undergraduate studies but find themselves in non-graduate employment are also likely to be a focus for widening participation approaches to adult learners. However, these adults are likely to face barriers to participate due to policy decisions that exclude them from accessing financial support due to already having participated in HE.

At this point the diagram becomes less linear, reflecting the complexity of the decision-making process involved in adult learners returning to formal learning. It reflects the finding from my research that demonstrates the pace at which adult learners not only return to learning, influenced by external factors such as existing personal and financial commitments, but engage in learning as they transition into that environment. For some, the approaches to widening participation discussed within this thesis that aim to develop confidence in academic ability and study skills are instantly rewarded with immediate transition and engagement in undergraduate
studies. Even then, circumstances outside of their control may result in possible withdrawal. The cycle of when and where to engage in formal learning begins again.

Continuation of study is also impacted by the issues that my research has identified through interviews with participants such as the relationship between the tutor and the student, how students engage with the learning environment in terms of interactions with other students and their response to the feedback they receive from their tutors. Each of these elements relates back to their experiences of formal learning during their compulsory education in the form of their perceptions of being academically invisible and aspirationally misaligned. The reinforcement of insecurities within that original learning environment is also played out as they reengage, with the potential for some to withdraw from formal learning, in a similar way to their previous experiences. Similarly, the pace at which the impact of these experience occurs is likely to differ amongst students. Approaches adopted through dedicated widening participation programmes need to be reflected as students continue their studies, recognising however that for some those approaches are less welcome. Personalisation needs to occur, not only as students progress beyond widening participation programmes but whilst they are engaged in them.

**7.2.4 Pathway 4**

Pathway 4 is not clearly identified within the concept map. The thesis is predominantly focused on widening participation to HE for adult learners and offers new insight and learning that builds upon existing literature in relation to adult education and adult learning. Its position within the context of lifelong learning however, provides an unintended outcome which could influence traditional approaches to widening participation. By reframing widening participation within traditional compulsory educational settings, in terms of lifelong participation, there is potential for more pupils who feel neglected or ignored by the current system to be included in a discourse that moves away from the ‘ideal’ route to HE, identified in Pathways 1 and 2. By promoting alternative routes to HE (and providers offering them) which may include formal, non-formal and informal learning, that can be accessed throughout the life-course could reframe adult learning more positively. It could create a discourse that suggests immediate progression to HE is only one option available but that accessing HE at later stages of life is also a positive option. Rather
than to make up for past failings, there is potential for the impact of negative experiences recalled by participants in my research to be reversed or at least tempered. However, this can only be realised if opportunities to engage in learning are made possible by policy decisions that recognise the value of life-wide and lifelong learning and which substantiate the rhetoric so clearly articulated within educational policy, but that is rarely delivered in practice.

Figure 5 presents a concept map developed to present the pathways 1 – 3 above and the rationale for the development of pathway 4. What follows is the response to the specific research questions identified at the beginning of this chapter and a series of recommendations for the case study institution, the sector and policymakers.

*Figure 5 Widening participation to HE for adult learners: A concept map*
7.3 Research sub-question 1

*How do past educational experiences impact on adult learners returning to formal learning as they engage within an HE environment?*

Previous experiences of education impact on adult learners returning to formal learning in terms of confidence in their academic ability and study skills (Cross, 1981; Tight, 1998; Crossan *et al.*, 2003; Waller, 2006). Widening participation initiatives aimed at developing confidence and study skills aim to overcome these challenges. My research contributes to and expands upon this existing body of knowledge. It focuses on why previous experiences of education have caused these anxieties for the participants in my research, in terms of: academic positioning (Finding 1 Section 5.2.1.1); the relationship with teachers and other pupils (Finding 2 Section 5.2.1.2); and family influences (Section 5.2.2). It also explores how these issues are experienced as adults return to formal learning. Supportive and developmental institutional structures might be put in place to overcome some of these anxieties, either directly through curriculum initiatives like the OU’s Access programme or pedagogical approaches within introductory courses such as the OU’s Level 4 modules. However, these do not disguise the deep-rooted issues that participants revealed initially caused their disengagement in prior education and which impact them as they return and progress through formal learning. Initiatives to support adult learners returning to formal learning fail to recognise how issues faced at school could potentially be experienced similarly as learners return to formal learning, irrespective of the pedagogical models that are adopted. In some cases, these pedagogical models may even exacerbate or resurrect school experiences, potentially undoing the benefits gained from the initial re-entry into formal education.

In addition to the dispositional, situational, institutional and sociocultural barriers to participation described by Gorard (2006) I would suggest an additional ‘pedagogical’ barrier as adult learners return to formal learning. Overcoming these pedagogical barriers could involve ensuring a consistent range of support options are available, whether they be academic or pastoral, involving tutors, other students and other support structures across the provider. These options could include more informal...
learning opportunities which may be less daunting for some students who find institution-led learning opportunities intimidating.

In addition, further consideration could be given to expectations of the role of the student and tutor within the HE environment. Previous educational experiences for some participants resulted in a particular relationship between teacher and pupil, predominantly relating to power structures between expert and novice. As some participants have re-engaged in learning, this perception of the role of the tutor is carried through to their new study environment and may result in reliance on the tutor on the Access programme and in some cases the need for a similar relationship as participants progress. A clearer articulation of the expectations of tutor and student roles, and explicit agreement between tutor and student could help to overcome this issue, especially if aligned with the recommendation above regarding the availability of a range of support options. Providing more opportunities for support (both informal and formal) and creating greater awareness of what is available could help to overcome some of the challenges many participants experienced in terms of reducing the support they required from their tutors as they progress through their studies. Equally, as was the case for some participants, there is an argument for providing more proactive support as students progress through their studies. This would address the issue that, despite the Access programme helping to develop confidence, there are some students who still struggle to seek help and support proactively. There is an expectation that requests for help and support come from the student themselves, as they progress onto their undergraduate studies. Although there may be arguments that suggest the current model allows students to become independent and autonomous learners, the evidence from my research is that participants’ support requirements differed, and the pace at which they became independent and autonomous learners varied. Therefore, models that allow flexibility and which recognise the heterogeneity of adult learners, would be welcomed.

There is likely to be a challenge in terms of how tutors and others involved in student support would know whether a student wanted or needed more proactive contact. This could be overcome through initial conversations at the beginning of the module during which the tutor and student would familiarise themselves not only with the
expectations of their roles but also with required support needs. Gaining agreement in terms of role expectations would be vital in this respect and would make a particular contribution in terms of overcoming the issue of the power relationship between student and tutor. This conversation, however, may need to be facilitated by a third party who is not directly involved in the teaching and learning aspect of the student experience. This could potentially enable the student to be more open to expressing their needs.

7.4 Research sub-question 2

How could the experiences of adult learners returning to formal learning impact on approaches to widen participation to HE for these students?

The framing of adult learners within the context of lifelong learning and the rhetoric around the value that adult learners provide to meet the needs of the economy and society, in addition to personal fulfilment and development (Faure, 1972; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019) is integral to this question. How these three components are valued in practice, however, is not equal. The disproportionate impact that changes to educational policy have had over the years on adult learners was presented within the literature chapter, particularly on those adult learners who return to formal learning after many years out of formal education and do so for the wider, transformative benefits of learning. The data from participants in my research support this perspective. Although some participants were studying with a career in mind, the impetus for them to begin their studies was driven by a life-changing moment.

Their experience of learning has helped them to overcome and address some of the challenges they have faced to some extent, developing confidence in themselves as they continue through their studies. However, this confidence is impacted by factors within the learning environment which have the potential to undo the transformative benefits participants experienced. The experiences of participants within my research offer additional insight from which approaches to widening participation can build in terms of the wider aspects of the learning environment.
Furthermore, recognising that the so-called ‘low-value subjects’ also contribute to the transformative benefits of learning just as much as other, so-called ‘high-value’ subjects is crucial to enabling all adults who wish to embark on formal study, the opportunity to do so. With a policy focus predominantly on the high-value subjects, there is a risk that many adult learners could be being prevented from participating in learning. Consequently, this is likely to have an influence on their engagement with society and the benefits that HE brings.

The recollections of participants’ previous experiences of education are often shrouded in negativity: that they were not good enough, or they were ignored or ridiculed and bullied. The needs of adult learners within the HE environment are seemingly also positioned within this deficit model of learning, and hence programmes such as the OU’s Access programme focus on addressing and overcoming past failings. The concept of lifelong learning if promoted as being truly what it is, ‘from cradle to grave’ (Field, 2006), could reverse the negativity which appears to enshroud adult learners. It is not just the needs of adults within this context that are relevant. This approach would recognise that learning needs may be different at different stages of life, but that one stage should not be prioritised over another. How and what people learn would then not be dictated by a narrow focus on the country’s economic needs but on the needs of the individual at any point in time, enabling them to enact changes within their own lives as well as respond and contribute to society more broadly. The experiences of participants in my research therefore can impact on approaches to widening participation in terms of presenting their life experiences more positively.

Their experiences also provide an opportunity to rethink how we frame learning within compulsory education. In doing so, feelings of academic and aspirational misalignment could be overcome as the discourse becomes one whereby participation in learning is a lifetime process and is not solely confined to a linear progression pathway within a defined timeframe through primary, secondary and tertiary education. Similarly, by creating an environment whereby diverse experiences are embraced within the learning environment students may be less likely to perceive themselves as different to their peers. In turn this could enable the
development of a shared identity (Freire, 1972) which recognises both heterogeneity and commonality amongst learners.

Given the financial contribution that adults make to the economy and the experiences that they bring to all aspects of their lives, there is also potential to develop the concept of an adult learner premium, rather than a graduate premium (which is slowly eroding (HESA, 2019c). Opportunities to remove the barriers to learning that adult learners have been exposed to should be valued as equal to other aims of education. Support to enable access to HE and progression throughout should be actively encouraged both financially and through the advice and guidance provided during compulsory education.

7.5 To what extent do approaches to widening participation to HE effectively meet the needs of adult learners?

This thesis originated in considerations about the context of adult learners within HE policy about widening participation, and approaches to outreach which focus primarily on flexibility, preparatory and introductory programmes and engagement with local communities. Some approaches aim to respond to the characteristics of adult learners in terms of their multiple identities as parents, employees and students and the flexibility required to accommodate these identities. Other approaches aim to develop confidence as adult learners re-engage with a formal learning environment. This approach is unsurprising given the perception of adult learners identified in response to research question 2, as individuals who have ‘failed’ at previous education. This view reinforces individuals’ own perceptions of themselves. It is evident from my research that programmes focused on the issues noted above do have a positive impact on individuals as learners and in some cases can effectively meet their needs. This is a perspective I already had through my professional position at the case study institution. However, while my research has reinforced this perspective, it has also highlighted gaps in these approaches, and therefore my thesis contributes to new knowledge for my own practice and for others working within the context of widening participation to HE for adult learners. Although in some cases widening participation initiatives do recognise the heterogeneity of adult learners, this is predominantly in the context of the challenges they face in terms of the
multiple roles that they undertake in the home, in work and in education. Some initiatives may also recognise the complex histories that adult learners bring into the educational environment, and address this through seeking to develop confidence in academic ability and study skills. However, if the pedagogical models within the programmes of study they move onto are too far removed from the original experience, some students may find that the initial benefits of learning gained through specific widening participation programmes are eroded.

Based on the above, my research offers the following insights which inform the recommendations in Section 7.7 and which contribute to new knowledge in the context of widening participation to HE for adult learners:

1. Past educational experiences not only impact on students’ confidence in their academic ability but also impact on how they engage and interact with the different elements of the formal educational environment. Approaches to widening participation, therefore, not only need to support the development of confidence but should recognise the influence that pedagogical frameworks may have on them as they progress. Recognising that adult learners are heterogeneous in this respect, is key, particularly in respect of the likelihood of adult learners proactively seeking support, disclosing personal information, or engaging with other students, despite personalised models of learning. Approaches should recognise the challenges that some students face as a result of their previous educational experience and how this might impact on how they engage within different learning environments. Support structures should recognise this nuance and embed a range of support opportunities as standard within its core provision.

2. Recognising that transformative learning occurs at different rates and points in time, approaches to widening participation could be extended and sustained beyond preparatory and introductory courses in order that transformative learning can be realised for all students. Due to the uniqueness of individual’s needs, these approaches should form part of the overarching pedagogical approach within the learning environment enabling less confident learners to benefit. This would also provide a safety net for
students whose confidence is inconsistent and who may want to seek support or be a passive recipient of support if needed.

3. Traditional approaches to widening participation aimed at school-aged children and in the widening participation policy context, can learn from the experiences of the participants in my research. Approaches could be reframed to provide a more holistic view of learning throughout the life-course, presenting learning in later life as a positive option that should be regarded as part of a learning continuum, rather than an either/or decision being made at school-leaving stage. This would require the discourse around widening participation to move towards the promotion of lifelong participation rather than the targeted marketing by HE institutions. It would also require more commitment by policymakers to provide opportunities for learning throughout the life-course, for example by expanding the programme of higher and degree apprenticeships.

4. Reducing opportunities and increasing barriers to participate in HE for adult learners is counter-productive to the concept of lifelong learning in its truest sense and the benefits that learning brings to all parts of life. Within a policy context, adult learning should be reprioritised within the lifelong learning discourse, with appropriate financial investment and support made available to ensure that decisions made in response to point 3 above, can be enacted as individuals transition through their life. The introduction of a Lifelong Learning Entitlement (Britten, 2021) may address this but whether it will appropriately meet the needs of all adult learners is yet to be seen.

7.6 Implications of my research for my own professional practice

The need for this research was identified as a result of my professional practice in developing a Widening Access and Success Strategy for the OU. The research project was based upon challenges identified in relation to delivering government priorities for widening participation to HE for adult learners returning to formal learning with low previous educational qualifications. In March 2019, the University’s senior leadership team approved the development of a new Widening Access and Success Strategy, renamed the Access, Participation and Success Strategy (APSS) (The Open
University, 2021a), for which I took the lead. Since then I have led on the development, submission and implementation of the University’s Access and Participation Plan (APP) (The Open University, 2019b). The findings from my research have informed commitments within each of these strategically important documents, and I continue to use the findings to influence future initiatives to address our objectives. In direct response to points 1 and 2 above, the University is implementing a Personal Learning Advisor service which provides bespoke personal support for students and a peer mentoring scheme. For both initiatives, evaluation of impact is key to identify what works, in order to respond to the need to embed initiatives within core pedagogical models, rather than them being perceived as additional support mechanisms. This recommendation to the OU and the HE sector is presented in Section 7.7 below.

Both the APSS and APP recognise that the term adult learner does not adequately represent the unique characteristics and individual personal histories that impact on how these learners engage in the formal learning environment as they return. Both the APSS and the APP recognise uniqueness and encompass the principle of being inclusive by design (Tomlinson, 1996), and this guides the institution in providing a range of options for advice, guidance and support across different parts of the business. They are both explicit in recognising that choice is pivotal to student success, and that an environment that implicitly and explicitly recognises individual needs is essential if approaches to widening participation are to be effective across the whole institution.

Further work is required, particularly in relation to managing the expectations between students and their tutor. In my new role as Assistant Director for Access, Participation and Success, I have an even greater opportunity to influence the development of the Teaching and Learning Plan and the actions that underpin it, thus incorporating these ideas.
7.7 Recommendations to the institution, HE sector and policymakers

7.7.1 For the OU

- Ensure support options are consistent, both explicit and implicit that recognise the different pace that transformative learning occurs, based on an understanding of previous experiences of formal education (Section 5.2.1.1 Finding 1; Section 5.2.1.2 Finding 2; Section 5.2.4.2 Finding 2; 5.2.4.3 Finding 3; Section 5.2.4.4 Finding 4; Section 5.2.4.5).
- Expand and make consistent the model of learning that supports the development of trusted relationships between tutors and students (Section 5.2.1.1 Finding 1; Section 5.2.4.2 Finding 2; Section 5.2.4.5).
- Develop existing learning environments to overcome student perceptions of inadequacy, creating a shared identity (Section 6.6).
- Consider more targeted support to encourage students with low previous educational qualifications and from low socio-economic groups to begin their studies with an Access module (Section 5.2.4.1).
- Develop clearer messaging regarding the expectations of the role of the tutor and student (Section 6.5).
- Provide alternative support mechanisms that are embedded within the core pedagogical framework, to overcome some of the challenges arising as a result of poor previous educational experiences (Sections 5.2.1, 5.2.3 and 5.2.4).
- Maintain a blended approach to learning that enables flexibility and choice for students (Section 5.2.4.4 Finding 4).

7.7.2 For all HE providers

- Move beyond specific widening participation programmes which avoid bolt-on approaches and enable greater inclusivity.
- Recognise the transformational benefits of HE, particularly for adult learners who have had poor previous experiences of education and have been out of formal education for some time. This requires a consideration of pedagogical
approaches to develop and sustain the transformation which span across all programmes of study (Section 5.2.4.1).

- Ensure support options, both explicit and implicit, are consistent throughout all programmes of study (Section 5.2.4).
- Develop the roles of tutors and fellow students as facilitators and critical friends within teaching and learning frameworks (Section 5.2.4.2 Finding 2; Section 5.2.4.3 Finding 3; Section 5.2.4.4 finding 4).
- Consider modes of study that enable choice in terms of independent learning and the development of collaborative skills within a non-threatening environment (Section 5.2.1.2; Section 5.2.4.4 Finding 4).
- Provide alternative support mechanisms that go beyond that of the tutor (Section 5.2.4) but which are embedded within core provision.
- Make use of blended learning approaches which include face-to-face environments, rather than relying increasingly on online technologies (Section 5.2.4.4).
- Develop inclusive approaches throughout the student journey, which respond to the multiple characteristics of adult learners, recognising that one-size does not fit all (Section 5.2.4).
- Create environments that offer choice and flexibility in terms of how to study and how to engage with other students, tutors and support staff (Section 5.2.4).
- Reframe approaches to widening participation to HE, recognising individual motivations and aspirations may not align with the dominant educational discourse at the time (Section 5.2.1.1). Initiatives delivered within APP reportable spend could be broadened to promote the benefits of learning rather than the promotion of individual providers.

7.7.3 **For policymakers**

- In response to the last bullet in Section 7.7.2, support the HE sector through alternative funding mechanisms to enable a shared responsibility for lifelong participation in HE rather than targeted approaches to increasing participation to individual institutions.
• Recognise that pedagogical barriers may exist to ensure HE providers develop approaches to meet adult learner needs effectively based on previous educational experiences (Section 5.2.4).

• Develop a discourse around learning rather than widening participation that presents adult learning as part of the lifelong learning journey, and highlights options to engage in learning throughout the life-course (Section 5.2.1.1)

• Within educational policy, realise the breadth of ambitions in terms of lifelong learning in its truest sense, and support opportunities for learning in later life rather than reduce or remove them.

## 7.8 Limitations of the research

The case study within which this thesis is framed, is a particular approach to HE that differs from the rest of the sector. The OU is a provider of part-time distance learning. Its open entry policy means that without any additional programmes to widening participation, it already commits to support students to access HE. These students would potentially struggle to access a traditional, face-to-face university, irrespective of the additional structural barriers that they may face due to the entry qualifications required. While my thesis does offer recommendations for the wider HE sector and policymakers, the issues that it identifies may manifest differently within the context of a traditional, face-to-face university, whose adult learner cohort is a minority. It does, however, provide the wider sector with insights into issues that are not covered in the existing literature, and specifically in relation to previous experiences of education for adult learners and how these experiences impact their engagement with HE as they return, wherever they study. This is important because providers are expected to attract and support more adult learners into the HE environment. The case study institution provides an excellent opportunity to explore the issues that affect adult learners, and others can use and adapt the findings of this study within their own context.

Although my research identifies areas for action which I have already begun to embed within my own professional practice, there is a limitation in that it does not provide recommendations for specific initiatives. This is particularly relevant in terms of recommendations to teaching and learning, support services, peer support and
informal networks. While I have used the findings of the research to influence some strategic projects within my institution, these are borne out of subsequent conversations with colleagues in terms of what might work, rather than being recommendations directly from the findings of the research. In addition, although the study draws attention to the positive impact of the Access model in terms of transformational learning, it does not offer recommendations for how this model could be implemented at an institutional level. The findings do, however, help to focus attention on particular aspects of the student experience. Further research and exploration would be required to develop the specific areas further.

There are also limitations in the research in terms of the number of students who participated and the experiences that they shared. It is likely and of interest, that others will have their own unique stories to tell although the practicalities of conducting interviews with more students is a challenge. Despite this, the richness of the accounts that participants have provided, yield valuable insights into adult learners within an HE environment from which other research can build.

Finally, the research is limited in the extent to which the participants reflect diversity within the OU’s student population. The research did not deliberately exclude students from different demographics, but it did not explicitly aim to attract particular students apart from those that represented disadvantage in terms of where they lived and income. The insight gained from the research is, therefore, quite broadly focused on the general cohort of students with low previous educational qualifications and from low socio-economic backgrounds. Further research could nuance the approach adopted within this thesis to focus on issues of ethnicity, gender, disability or poverty. This would require additional literature to be reviewed within each of these contexts and hence why they were out of scope within my thesis.

### 7.9 Contribution to knowledge

This research contributes to existing knowledge within the context of widening participation to HE for adult learners and is based on my expertise and knowledge as a practitioner who straddles operational, strategic and policy landscapes. It brings together two key literatures - widening participation to HE and adult learning - in order to respond to the introduction of adult learners within widening participation.
policy. It supports the arguments relating to heterogeneity within the adult-learner student cohort and extends this to provide greater insight into what this looks like based on past educational experience, and how these experiences impact on adult learners as they return to learning. This raises the level of awareness of providers of HE regarding the needs of adult learners, particularly in relation to the transformative benefits of learning, a concept particularly pertinent to this student cohort.

It shines a light on the current policy context in relation to widening participation to HE in terms of how ‘success’ is measured. HE providers are judged on hard measures of student recruitment, continuation metrics, degree classifications and progression to highly skilled employment or further study. This narrow focus fails to acknowledge that HE also transforms the lives of individuals, a concept probably more relevant to students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds but particularly relevant to adult learners who have been out of education for some time, often having had poor previous experiences of education.

The drive to remove so-called ‘low-value’ degrees and restricted funding opportunities for some courses neglects to place a value on the transformative benefits of learning which go beyond meeting the needs of the economy, so often the driving force being educational policy. Similarly, models of teaching that ring-fence bespoke widening participation programmes fail to acknowledge that for some students the transformative benefits of learning may take longer to reach and therefore approaches need to continue to be implemented to support the aim of them becoming independent learners, as they progress through their studies. Measures of success that are confined to the narrow metrics detailed above are likely to continue to position many adult learners on the fringes of widening participation policy and therefore approaches to supporting them into HE will remain restricted to outreach activity as identified within the OFFA report (2017), without any acknowledgement of the personal journey many adult learners will experience. Whilst my research has been focused on adult learners, these findings are also likely to be relevant to younger students from widening participation backgrounds and therefore contributes to the general literature on widening participation from the neglected perspective of transformative learning.
This study also contributes to the discourse around lifelong learning, and the findings supporting recommendations to reframe the language used both for adult learners as they return to learning, and also for school pupils who are traditionally the target group for widening participation initiatives. It has brought two worlds together and identified some key issues and challenges in supporting adult learners into HE. It demonstrates that the unique experiences of adult learners do not require only the provision of additional support (either explicitly or implicitly embedded with pedagogical models) to develop confidence and study skills, but also support to ensure that the issues that they experienced during compulsory education are not resurrected as they progress through their HE studies.

7.10 Opportunities for further research

This thesis supports existing institutional evidence around the benefits to some students, especially those with widening participation characteristics, of undertaking an Access module prior to progression to the undergraduate programme. It identifies, through discussion about their past experiences of education, particular issues and challenges that adult learners face as they return to learning irrespective of whether they are referring to their Access module or their Level 4 module. Further research could enhance the findings of this thesis to focus on one particular element, for instance the tutor/student relationship, with the aim of developing practical recommendations in terms of how that relationship and the expectations of each participant could be managed. Similarly, further research could focus on the personalised nature of learning, peer support and networking, or specifics around approaches to teaching and learning.

Given the diversity of the students who study with the OU, and the requirement by the OFS to look at intersections between different demographics, there is an opportunity to extend this research, including the methodological framework and research methods, to specific groupings within the broad context of adult learning, e.g., ethnic groups, students with disabilities, care leavers, and so on. This would provide even greater insight into the lived experiences of adult learners and the challenges they face as they return to learning.
The research has focused specifically on the English policy context which differs from the other nations of the UK. There is an opportunity to extend the research to the other nations, reflecting upon their different funding models and widening participation requirements. There is also potential to compare the English context with wider international approaches to widening participation and the different policy contexts around adult, part-time, distance learning.

7.11 Reflections on my EdD journey

Given the focus of my research on transformative learning, I feel it appropriate to offer a reflective section within my thesis, in terms of my own transformation as a researcher and within my professional role within the case study institution. My position as an insider-researcher has, perhaps, presented more challenges to the research process than I had originally envisaged. My professional role is so deeply engrained within the fabric of this thesis that it has sometimes meant that I initially took concepts, ideas and challenges for granted. In this respect I fell into the trap of presenting everything ‘widening participation’, concepts of identity and belonging, deficit models, evaluation, success measures - considering adult learners within this context but perhaps neglecting to explore other aspects of adult learning, adult education and subsequently lifelong learning which would provide the insight to colleagues across the sector, which was missing. This approach is the foundation upon which my research was based but early developments were still bounded within the traditional concept of widening participation rather than placing adult learning, adult education and lifelong learning at the heart of the thesis.

Feedback on earlier drafts enabled me to reflect on this and to explore the literature beyond ‘widening participation’ to investigate the real crux of the issue facing adult learners within the case study institution and the particular concept of transformative learning. As the findings of my research demonstrate, this is a concept currently missing from widening participation policy and therefore would not have arisen in the exploration of the generic widening participation literature.

And so this is where my transformation from practitioner to researcher is illuminated - my role now becomes one of dissemination at policy, sector and institutional level. I have grown as an academic, working within the domain of widening participation to
HE whereby like-minded practitioners, share their initiatives to attract and support students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds to their organisation. I have my own expertise and specialism that contributes new knowledge, bringing the worlds of adult learning and widening participation together, which I will continue to advocate and undertake further research to ensure transformative learning becomes a key consideration within practice. It may be too ambitious to think that my research could influence policymaker decisions in terms of success measures, but by using my networks I can begin to put transformative learning onto the widening participation radar.
References


Available at: www.ncolr.org/jiol.


Callender, C. (2018) *Stop the Decline in Part-time Undergraduate Study*|WonkHE|Comment. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/stop-the-


Department for Education (2021) *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth*. Available at:

Department for Education (2019a) *Independent Panel Report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*. Available at:


Gelpi, E. (1979) A Future for Lifelong Education. Manchester: University of Manchester, Department of Adult and Higher Education.


Jarvis, P. (2006) The Theory and Practice of Teaching. 2nd ed. Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=cQkSoQtOeR8C&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=jarvis+learning+theory&ots=uubQwnaHzP&sig=NrWzk2QZxFlgkKMrvf8S1jHoy0I&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=jarvis learning theory&f=false.


Kitzinger, J. (1994) ‘The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants’, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 16(1), pp. 103–121. doi: 10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347023.


Learning and Work Institute (2021) *Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2021*. 222


Mannerings, H. (2018) 'Mind the gap...how can we help commuter students get the most out of their studies?', *Higher Education Academy, AdvanceHE Knowledge Hub*. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/blog-entry/mind-gap-how-can-we-help-commuter-students-get-most-out-their-studies (Accessed: 15 February 2021).


Merriam, S. B. (1998) *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in*


Mersinoglu Craggs, Y. (2020) ‘Adult learning “real cause for concern” as participation hits record low’, FE Week, 1 January. Available at: https://feweek.co.uk/2020/01/01/adult-learning-real-cause-for-concern-as-participation-hits-record-low/.


Million Plus (2013) *What’s the Value of a UK Degree?* Available at:

Million Plus and NUS (2012) *Never Too Late to Learn: Mature Students in Higher Education.* Available at:


Ministry of Reconstruction (1919) *Adult Education Committee: Final Report.* Available at:
https://books.googleusercontent.com/books/content?req=AKW5QafMDiasqeeJ5tU2e-Q6uYyM2HNQbzs5gYwsVgbynO_gulKXPLCRL8ZLcbgLqHqhbTTPpKbgHEfq2KsIMD-kHRvYJepb2ByrGCaXdDbfWHvF9ilRBPYrVgi3P2-h9p5juL4j0bnicmj-tbjaB4DxzrmsYltLDkLecGxv9CaMBwxOHqTEjpnyUM6Y7tlxShhIxZeA (Accessed: 3 January 2021).

MKCollege (2021) *Access to Higher Education - MK College.* Available at:


Neff, J. A. (1979) ‘Interaction versus hypothetical others: the use of vignettes in
attitude research’, *Sociology and Social Research*, 64, pp. 105–125.

Nielsen, M. L. and Ingwersen, P. (1999) ‘The word association methodology - a gateway to work-task based retrieval’, *MIRA*, 14-16 April. Available at:


Nussbaum, M. C. (2011) *Creating capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Available at:
https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Gg7Q2V8fi8gC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=nussbaum+capabilities&ots=l2Yzj9RUgl&sig=l0RL-vpeGTzm8zsFvmGRwrz9GEY#v=onepage&q=nussbaum capabilities&f=false (Accessed: 28 March 2019).


OFS (2020b) *Calculation of a New Adult HE Area-based Measure*. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b3f73e91-4848-49b9-ad7a-


The Open University (no date) ‘Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning’. Available at: https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/openu/jwpll.


Universities UK (2020) Majority of Adult Learners Would Upskill at University If Given the Chance, 21 October. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/majority-adult-learners-would-upskill.


Appendices

Appendix 1 The Open University

The Open University (OU) is the largest provider of part-time, distance learning in the UK, with over 170,000 students across the four nations of the UK. Established in 1969 it has educated over 2 million students to achieve a degree qualification. The OU is unique in that students are not required to hold any previous level of education which would prevent them from entering traditional face to face universities.

The OU’s mission is ‘to be open to people, places, methods and ideas’, promoting educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential.

(The Open University, 2019a)

In many ways the OU already widens participation through its core offer. Fees are generally below the basic fee level, although students studying at full time intensity may pay just over the basic fee. Historically courses were delivered through printed books with a range of supplementary material (audio cassettes, videos, radio and television programmes). The OU is increasingly embedding online learning within its mode of learning, offering online tutorials and discussion forums alongside the support of module tutors.

Because of the OU’s open access model, Educational Advisers within Student Recruitment and Support Centres, offer support to students prior to registering on a module and whilst on course. Study skills are embedded within modules, particularly in Year 1 and students are supported through their studies by tutors. Students engage with their tutors via timetabled tutorials that are delivered online or face to face. In order to offer flexibility students can attend any tutorial, not necessarily that delivered by their allocated tutor. They can contact their tutor at any time in between tutorials via email or telephone. Tutors will make contact with their students at the beginning of their module at which point it will be agreed how and when contact can
be made. Students can also engage with other students through the online tutorials and online discussion forums, plus face-to-face tutorials if available.

OU study is module-based. Students sign up for modules that support their named qualification and can take up to 16 years to complete their degree. For students studying for an Open degree, students can choose modules across subjects and disciplines. Generally, students can register to begin their studies in October or February (with some exceptions).

Figure 4. The demographic breakdown of OU student data 2018/19 (Source: OU data 2019).
Appendix 2 Employability of Qualifiers Survey

The Employability of Qualifiers Survey (EQS), conducted annually by the Open University (OU), is a survey of alumni approximately 3 years after achieving their qualification. The survey gathers insight into the impact of OU study and the careers and employability outcomes of OU students. EQS aims to gather insight into the impact of OU study and the careers and employability outcomes of OU alumni. The data report in this these relates to the survey that ran in October 2018. 2,977 respondents filled out the survey and included alumni who achieved an OU qualification in 2014/15.

The data below are the results of the analysis of the survey for students based on the level of previous educational qualifications students began their studies with.

**Q10. Overall, would you agree that studying with the OU has/will help you achieve your career goals? (all participants)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Previous Qualifications</th>
<th>Strongly agree/agree n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Formal Qualifications or Less than A Levels</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A levels or higher</td>
<td>1799</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td>2234</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Q12. Overall, would you agree that studying with the OU has/will help you achieve your personal (not career-related) goals? (all participants)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Previous Qualifications</th>
<th>Strongly agree/agree n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Formal Qualifications or Less than A Levels</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>90.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A levels or higher</td>
<td>2174</td>
<td>90.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td>2684</td>
<td>90.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3 The Open University's Access Programme

Access modules were introduced in 2013 as a response to the fee rise in England and are specifically designed to develop study skills and boost confidence in students’ academic abilities.

The OU offers three interdisciplinary Access modules:

- Arts and languages Access module (Y031)
- People, work and society Access module (Y032)
- Science, technology and maths Access module (Y033)

The cost of an Access module is half that of other OU modules of similar credit (£761). Students who have household incomes of less than £25,000, with no prior HE experience and living in England are eligible for a full fee waiver. (Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have their own funding models).

Access modules are 30 credits at Level 0, but do not count towards a qualification and are designed to introduce students to HE level study, in a supportive environment. There are no entry requirements for OU students and Access modules are not considered to be a pre-requisite for OU study. Modules last for 30 weeks.

Students signed up to an Access module receive one to one tutoring over the telephone, date and time agreed between the tutor and the students. The tutor is proactive at calling the student at the agreed time. Module materials are presented in hard copy and students are not expected to partake in any online activity until a third into the module. There are no face-to-face tutorials with other students. Students are able to participate in general online forums, but this is not a requirement of the module.

Students submit three tutor marked assignments (TMAs) for which feedback will be provided by their tutor but which do not contribute to their final result. Feedback is formative and developmental. The final end of course marked assignment (ECMA) results in a distinction, pass or fail. Students do not need to submit or pass the TMAs to pass the course overall.

Access modules are specifically tailored for students with widening participation characteristics in terms of those having not studied for some time, who have low...
previous educational qualifications (PEQs). In 2019/20 60% of Access students had low PEQs (approximately 2,500 students), compared to 34% on the OU’s Level 4 modules (approximately 50,000 students). The approach on Access provides a gentle introduction to HE study with a view to developing confidence in academic ability and study skills. Approximately 5,000 students study an Access module in any one academic year.
Appendix 4 Student Experience at the End of a Module Survey

The Student Experience at the End of a Module (SEaM) Survey is the OU’s internal instrument for understanding the student experience. It is distributed monthly to students at the end of their module. Completion of the survey is optional for students.

In the 2019/20 academic year a total of 101,204 students were invited to participate in the SEaM survey, across all levels of study. An 11% response rate was returned, equating to 11,162 responses. The analysis of SEaM data used responses for 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years. Relevant survey questions for this thesis were:

- Contact from my tutor at the start of the module helped me get started with my studies.
- I could get in touch with my tutor when necessary
- I was satisfied with the support provided by my tutor on this module.
- My tutor encouraged me in my studies.
- My tutor’s feedback on assessed tasks explained the mark that I received.
- My tutor’s feedback on assessed tasks helped me prepare for the next assessment.
- My tutor’s feedback on assessed tasks helped me to learn.

The report received from the Data and Student Analytics team was based on the criteria below and aligned with the sample within which this EdD research is focused, specifically:

A statistical report of the Student Experience on a Module Survey (SEaM) was provided by the University’s Data and Student Analytics (D&SA) team.

- Aged 25 – 55
- Low socio-economic group

The report showed responses for:

---

6 Low socio-economic group is defined as students living in the most deprived areas (based on Index of Multiple Deprivation) and/or with low prior educational qualifications (less than 2 A levels).
- Access students (83)
- Level 4 students who had passed an Access course (66)
- Level 4 students who had not completed an Access course (500)

The data reported from the SEaM survey should be used with some caution due to the optional nature of the survey and the small numbers returned in some cases.
Appendix 5 Participant consent form

Doctorate in Education study: Understanding the impact of widening participation language on student self-concept

Consent form for interview participants

Thank you for your interest in taking part in my research study.

I am asking you to complete this form to make sure that you are clear about what is involved, including how any data about you will be collected and kept safe.

The form confirms your agreement to be interviewed as part of my research for my Doctorate in Education (EdD). The interview will be conducted by telephone and will be recorded. It will last for up to 45 minutes. I am particularly interested in exploring with you how the language used in policies potentially affects how students feel about themselves and their subsequent engagement with HE. I anticipate that the findings of the research will be used to improve how the university and potentially policymakers communicate with current and potential students.

If at any point during the research you feel that you do not wish to continue you are free to withdraw and to request any data that has been gathered from you to be destroyed. However once the data has been aggregated for analysis, I will not be able to remove you from it. The date where you will no longer be able to withdraw is 28th February 2018.

Your details and the data generated from the project will be stored under password protected documents and no one except for me will have access to it. Any findings from the research will not identify you individually and names of participants will be anonymised.

Your participation or non-participation is something that is separate from your OU study and will not affect your assessment in any way.
If you are willing to take part in this research, please tick the box, complete the details below, and return the signed form.

☐  *I am willing to take part in this research, and I give my permission for the interview to be recorded and the data collected to be used in an anonymous form in any written reports, presentations and published papers relating to this study. My written consent will be sought separately before any identifiable data are used in such dissemination.*

Signing this form indicates that you understand the purpose of the research, as explained in the email invitation and participant information leaflet and accept the conditions for handling the data you provide.

Name:
Signature:
Date of Signature:

Please return this completed form to wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk. A typed or electronic signature will suffice.
Appendix 6 Pilot study participant information leaflet

‘Widening Participation’ – Research Study

Participant Information leaflet

You are invited to participate in a research project that I am conducting as part of my study for a Doctorate in Education (EdD).

This research project has been approved by the Open University SRPP (Student Research Project Panel).

This information leaflet provides details about why the research is being carried out and what is involved. Before you agree to take part in this study, please take time to read the information on this leaflet and do get in touch with me at wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk if you have any general questions.

What is the purpose of the study?

I am studying for a Doctorate in Education and am conducting this research as part of my study.

One of the priorities of higher education policy across the UK over the past 50 years has been to expand the number of people entering higher education, particularly those from under-represented groups. This approach is referred to as ‘widening participation’. The following list gives a general idea of the focus of government policy:

People from low-income backgrounds

People living in deprived areas

People working in low skilled occupations

Those who are disabled

Black and minority ethnic (BME) people

White working-class males
In my research I am seeking to explore what students feel about ‘widening participation’ in particular the potential impact of being labelled as a widening participation student on the study experience. I am hoping that my research will help the university and others within higher education to gain a better understanding of the experiences of students so that they can be more fully supported throughout their student journey.

When I’m not studying, I work for the OU as a Research, Evaluation and Information Manager in the Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships where I manage research projects that are both externally and internally funded and contribute more generally to the work around inclusion. Previous to this I trained as a primary school teacher, worked at the Learning and Skills Council as a Research Manager and have undertaken many voluntary roles within the community. I am currently Club Secretary for a local football team. I have also been an OU student.

**What happens if you take part?**

I’m asking you to take part in an interview over the telephone. This can be in the day or the evening, depending on what’s best for you. Before I interview you I will ask you to sign a consent form, confirming that you agree to participate in this research.

The interview will be an opportunity for you to tell me about your experience of studying with the OU. I’m particularly interested in discussing why you chose to study an Access module prior to Level 1. I am also interested in your views around widening participation, whether you were aware of this concept prior to this research and what your thoughts are around what it might mean to a student who is labelled as a widening participation student and also to those students who aren’t. The conversation will last for approximately half an hour and it will be recorded.

**What happens to the information you disclose?**

Any information you disclose will remain confidential and your identity will be anonymised.

All information relating to recorded conversations will be stored in accordance with Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts and equal opportunities legislation. Any data stored will be stored until one year after the end of the research project and
then destroyed. You have the right to ask for a copy of any personal data held in
relation to you and this research study and no one else has this right. You do not have
the right to view any other participant’s data.

**Can you withdraw your participation?**

You can withdraw your participation at any time up to the point where data is
aggregated. Any information you have given prior to your withdrawal will be
destroyed unless you give your permission for it to be used.

**Contacts for further information:**

Please do not hesitate to get in touch with me if you have any further questions. My
contact details are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy Fowle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk">wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I hope you will be interested in taking part in my research and look forward to
speaking to you if you are willing and able to participate.

Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet and please remember to keep a copy
of it should you decide to take part in my research.

Best wishes,

Wendy Fowle

EdD student
Appendix 7 Pilot study interview schedule

Welcome and introductions

This introductory section will cover:

- Introducing myself as a researcher and thanking the interviewee for agreeing to take part in the research
- Explaining the nature of my research, and that it is being conducted as part of study towards a Doctorate in Education (referring back to initial invitation to participate in the research)
- Confirmation that the participant is giving informed consent (referring back to consent form that the interviewee will have signed)—including for recording this interview, which will take up to an hour

Decision to undertake an Access module prior to Level 1

- Start by checking out the module they are currently studying and what previous Access module they took.
- Did you intend to study an Access module initially?
- Why did you choose to study an Access module prior to Level 1?
- Who influenced your decision?
- Friends and family o Colleagues o OU staff
- How did you feel in these discussions?
- Did any of these discussion impact on how you approached your Access studies?
- What impact has studying the Access module had on your level 1 studies?
**Studying a level 1 module**

- Has the decision-making process to study an Access module affected your continuing experience onto Level 1?
- Has anything changed in the way you feel about yourself and your studies from when you started on Access? This could be in terms of:
  - whether you feel part of the OU student community
  - whether you feel that you belong in an HE environment
  - how you identify with the university, other students, tutor

**Widening participation**

- What does the phrase widening participation mean to you?
- During your OU study have you been aware of any widening participation initiatives either directly or with other students?
- Has widening participation factored in any previous experience outside of the OU?
- Are you aware of other students who may be labelled as widening participation?
- How does this affect you and/or them?

**Any other issues identified by student**

- Is there anything else that you would like to say to me about your experience of OU study that we haven’t covered? Or anything that you would like to ask me?

**Ending and thanks**

To include: Thanking the interviewee for their time, and wishing them good luck with their OU study.
Appendix 8 Main study participant Information Leaflet

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project that I am conducting as part of my study for a Doctorate in Education (EdD). The research will also contribute to my work in a professional capacity as Senior Manager: Research and Evaluation (Widening Access and Success) at the Open University (OU).

This research project has been approved by the OU’s SRPP (Student Research Project Panel) and the ethics committee (HREC).

This information leaflet provides details about why the research is being carried out and what involvement would be expected from you if you decide to participate. Before you agree to take part in this study, I would be grateful if you could take some time to read the information on this leaflet. If you have any questions or concerns, please do get in touch with me at wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk or my EdD supervisor, Dr John Butcher (john.butcher@open.ac.uk).

What is the purpose of the study?

I am studying for a Doctorate in Education (EdD) and am conducting this research as part of my study. It will also inform my work at the OU in relation to developing institutional policies for supporting students who face the most challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education (HE). I am particularly interested in exploring with you how the language used in policies potentially affects how students feel about themselves and their subsequent engagement with HE. I anticipate that the findings of the research will be used to improve how the university and potentially policymakers communicate with current and potential students.

Why have I been chosen for this study?

I am interested in exploring the impact of the language used by policymakers and HE institutions around widening participation to HE. You have been chosen for this study, as a student at the OU who has followed a particular study pathway (Access modules prior to Level 1) to offer insight into your own experiences in terms of the language used to communicate to current and future students.
What happens if you take part?

The research involves one to one telephone interviews at a time and day that suits you. The conversation will last between 30 and 45 minutes. Before I interview you I will ask you to sign a consent form which confirms that you agree to participate in this research. The interview will explore issues in relation to your general educational experience and specifically the language used in policies around widening participation to HE. You will be emailed three scenarios prior to the interview, for you to read and identify which one best describes your own particular circumstances. This will be used to help frame the telephone interview.

What happens to the information you disclose?

Any information you disclose will be treated in the strictest confidence and will only be reported once analysis has been undertaken to avoid you being identified personally. Any quotes taken from the interview will be anonymised. The information you provide is entirely separate to your studies.

All information relating to recorded conversations will be stored in accordance with Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts and equal opportunities legislation. Any personal data will be stored one year after the end of the research project (October 2019). You have the right to ask for a copy of any personal data held in relation to you and this research study and no one else has this right. You do not have the right to view any other participant’s data.

Can you withdraw your participation?

If at any point during the research you feel that you do not wish to continue, you are free to withdraw and to request any data that has been gathered from you to be destroyed. However once the data has been brought together for analysis, I will not be able to remove you from it. The date where you will no longer be able to withdraw is 28 February 2018.

Timescales

I propose that the interviews take place in January 2018. They will be scheduled on a date and time that is convenient to you.
About me

As previously mentioned I currently work at the OU as a Senior Manager for research and evaluation into initiatives to support students who face the most challenges in accessing HE and being successful within it. This work involves managing research projects that are both externally and internally funded and contributing more generally to the work around inclusion. I have also studied with the OU, gaining my BSc in 2001 and worked in the Faculty of Business and Law during this time. Between then and now I worked at the Learning and Skills Council as a Research Manager, as a teaching assistant while my children were small and also trained as a primary school teacher. I have also undertaken many voluntary roles within my local community primarily centered on education and am currently Club Secretary for a local football team.

Contacts for further information:

Please do not hesitate to get in touch with me if you have any further questions. My contact details are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy Fowle</th>
<th>Dr John Butcher (EdD Supervisor)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk">wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:john.butcher@open.ac.uk">john.butcher@open.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I hope you will be interested in taking part in this very important research and look forward to speaking to you if you are willing and able to participate.

Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet and please remember to keep a copy of it should you decide to take part.

Best wishes,

Wendy Fowle

EdD student
Appendix 9 Main study interview schedule

Welcome and introductions

This introductory section will cover:

- Introducing myself as a researcher and thanking the interviewee for agreeing to take part in the research
- Explaining the nature of my research, and that it is being conducted as part of study towards a Doctorate in Education (referring back to initial invitation to participate in the research).
- Explain that I am particularly interested in exploring issues around self-concept i.e., self-esteem, self-confidence, self-image and what influenced those feelings in relation to education and what you think could benefit future students who had similar experiences to theirs, particularly around how institutions and policymakers communicate to them.
- Confirmation that the participant is giving informed consent (referring back to the consent form that the interviewee will have signed)—including for recording this interview, which will take up to 45 minutes.

1. Talking through the vignette

- Remind participants that they were sent three vignettes prior to the interview and ask did they read through them?
- Was there one that particularly resonated with them?
- If not, why not?
- Were there specific aspects of all of them that they could identify with?
- If yes, explore these aspects of the vignettes.
- If they identified with one particular vignette, explore the vignette with them asking which parts particularly related to their own experience?
- Explore all aspects of the vignette even if they didn’t relate to them.
- If they couldn’t identify with any aspect of the vignettes, ask them to tell their own story.
  - Ask if there are any particular words or phrases that evoked particular emotions
• Explore these words and phrases with them?
• How did they make them feel?
• Did they identify with them?
• What alternative language could be used?

2. Specific questions (remind the student that you are particularly interested in the language that is used)
• What were your anxieties, concerns before you registered to study with the OU?
• Why the OU – did they do something that others didn’t if so, what?
• What was it that persuaded you to take that first step into HE?
• What helped to overcome your insecurities?
• What continues to reinforce those insecurities and how do you/the institution help to overcome them?
• If you were to compare your levels of self-confidence and self-esteem now compared to when you started on Access and maybe even before then how would you describe them?
• Is there anything that could have been done differently that would have encouraged you to enter HE at 18?
• What do you think others can learn from your experience in terms of how we communicate with students who have had experiences similar to yours?

3. General discussion around Access and decisions to study (if not covered in the above)
• What motivated you to engage with HE?
• Why did you decide to study an Access module rather than go straight in a L1?
• Was the financial support an influencing factor?
• Who influenced that decision?
• How do you think this has set you up for future studies?
• **Any other issues identified by student**
  
  Is there anything else that you would like to say to me about your experience and how your self-confidence and self-esteem has been affected by your experience of education in the past and present.

• Is there anything that you would like to ask me?

4. **Ending and thanks**

  To include: Thanking the interviewee for their time and wishing them good luck with their OU study.
## Appendix 10 Other participant information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OU Educational Advisers</strong></td>
<td>OU Educational Advisers support students as they enquire with the OU and on-course. They are located in Nottingham and Manchester Offices. Colleagues in Manchester support students within the Access programme and also the faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). Senior Educational Advisers provide advice and guidance and front-line educational advisers provide information to students. Many Educational Advisers who participated in my research had backgrounds in counselling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skype for business</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tutor Phil and Tutor Nicole Interviews face to face and Skype for Business</strong></td>
<td>Tutor Phil and Tutor Nicole are tutors on the Access Programme and other undergraduate modules, particularly Level 4 modules. Tutor Nicole also tutors on OU Level 6 module. One of the interviews was face to face and the other via Skype for Business. Tutor Rachel tutors on a Level 4 Maths module, the conversation with her was via MSTeams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students on Access modules Face to face discussion at the OU</strong></td>
<td>The students who were invited to the OU to speak with Chris Millward, Director of Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students (OFS) were all studying on the Access programme at the time of the meeting. Six students participated in the discussion, from a range of backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professor Les Ebdon</strong></td>
<td>Professor Ebdon comes from a widening participation background and studied Chemistry at Imperial College London. He subsequently worked researching environmental science prior to becoming a reader and then Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Plymouth. He subsequently became Vice-Chancellor at the University of Luton. Following retirement, he was offered the position of Director of Fair Access at the Office for Fair Access. At the time of the interview he was in the process of handing over responsibility to Chris Millward, the new Director of Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students (OFS).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 11 Example of data analysis using Powerpoint

Last year I had a lot of contact with my tutor. She was really good and she was really encouraging, which does motivate you quite a lot.

Alien

My tutor was great. She was really good at encouraging me and quashing any of my anxieties or worries about anything.

Adam

I loved the way she spoke to you. She was great, she was lovelv, she was very calm. For the first fifteen minutes of the conversation it was just a conversation, and then all of a sudden that conversation would then go into something else... then we'd start off with what we needed to talk about.

Gary

There was self-doubt, but you've got so much support and information that it took that all away. It literally did take that all away, because anything I'd read about I got an answer to and if I didn't get an answer to someone'd get back to me about it, you know. And the access course gave me the chance just to try.

Louise

I had a fantastic tutor. She was amazing, she was so supportive, so helpful.

Melanie

My tutor was brilliant. She was very, very reassuring. She did help a lot. But I only spoke to her over the phone or through email. So, it wasn't ever face to face, but it did help.

Iren

Now, I rang my tutor at the time and said “Oh my goodness, I don't think I'm going to be able to do this EMA in time...” he listened to my concerns, and he said “Hang in what you've done, because who knows, if it's over forty per cent” he said “And put a little note at the bottom about what's gone on in your life and why this has happened”... Just making that phone call to him and hearing him say to me “It's alright if that happens” Louise