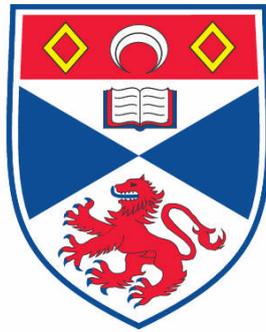


**THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE MATURE STUDENT  
EXPERIENCE**

**Christine Isabel Lusk**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St. Andrews**



**2008**

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**The Social Construction  
of the  
Mature Student Experience**

Doctor of Philosophy

Christine Isabel Lusk

July 2008

## **The Social Construction of the Mature Student Experience**

### *Abstract*

Using a Social Constructionist lens, this study gathers fresh empirical data on the experience of a “Mature Student”, examining its multiple constructions, both objective and subjective, within the context of a Scottish Ancient university. For six centuries, Ancient universities have held expectations that incoming students will adjust to fit the autonomous institutional culture. However the expansion of Higher Education in 1992 has introduced changes in legislation and funding which have shifted the onus of that adjustment to the organisations themselves.

This study is placed at the fundamental core of the tension between an institution struggling with the changing nature of its purpose and non-traditional students with changing expectations. Through analysis of daily journals and semi-structured interviews with 16 students and 12 staff, it explores the interpretations which both sets of actors take from student/institution interaction, and does so with respect to the student’s holistic life context rather than viewing only the learner role. Particular emphasis is placed on the losses and gains from the experience, including examination of what a degree symbolises in personal, fiscal and psychological terms.

Based on a synthesis of literature reviews and empirical data, the study categorises the Mature students into three groups according to experiential themes within the student journey, drawing out theoretical and policy contributions from the process. Although mismatches are shown to exist between student and staff expectations of institutional purpose, a contemporary, and valid, role for the Ancient institution is outlined in terms of developing individual agency.

## Thesis Declaration

I, Christine Isabel Lusk, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 1999 as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D.; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1999 and 2008.

Date 7.7.08

Signature of Candidate

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

Date 7.7.08

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### PART I - THE CONTEXT

	<i>Page No.</i>
Chapter 1      Introduction	
1.1      The Driving Force	18
1.2      The HE Expansion	21
1.3      Diversity in HE	22
1.4      Accountability of the HE Sector	24
1.5      The Focus of this Study	26
1.6      The Structure of this Study	29
Chapter 2      Analysing Organisations - Theoretical Frameworks	
2.1      Introduction	33
2.2      The University as an Organisation	34
2.2.1      Classical/Modernist/Postmodern Analysis	35
2.2.2      Symbolic Interpretive Perspective	36
2.3      Organisational Culture	38
2.4      Introducing Diverse Membership to an Organisation	40
2.5      The Change Management Process	42
2.6      Resistance to Change	44
2.6.1      Perceptual Blocks	45
2.6.2      Emotional Blocks	45
2.6.3      Cultural Blocks	45
2.6.4      Environmental Blocks	46
2.6.5      Cognitive Blocks	46
2.7      Summary	47
Chapter 3      The History and Philosophical Underpinnings of Universities	
3.1      Introduction	50
3.2      The Historical Context	50

3.3	Academic Standards	56
3.4	Equality of Opportunity	58
3.5	A Mission of “Lifelong Learning”	62
3.6	Academic Freedom/Accountability	64
3.7	Summary	69

## PART II - THE LITERATURE

Chapter 4	Purpose <i>versus</i> Expectations	
4.1	Introduction	72
4.2	The University Purpose Debate	73
	4.2.1 Teaching and Research	74
	4.2.2 Social Change	76
	4.2.3 Knowledge Transfer	79
	4.2.4 Newman	81
	4.2.5 Specialist Institutions	82
4.3	Individual Motivations	84
	4.3.1 Political Pressure	84
	4.3.2 Financial and Employment Rewards	85
	4.3.3 Self-Improvement	88
	4.3.4 Institutional Choice	90
4.4	Political and Philosophical Tensions	92
	4.4.1 Standards <i>versus</i> Expansion	92
	4.4.2 Collegiality <i>versus</i> Managerial	93
	4.4.3 Exclusivity <i>versus</i> Inclusion	96
	4.4.4 Knowledge <i>versus</i> Skills Training	98
4.5	Summary	99
Chapter 5	Merging the Student and the University	
5.1	Introduction	102
5.2	Developing Identity	103

5.3	Integration	110
	5.3.1. “Fit” – An Integration Measure	118
	5.3.2 Discourses – An Integration Tool	119
5.4	Challenges for Mature Students	122
	5.4.1 Family Concerns	122
	5.4.2 Financial Challenges	123
5.5	Interface with Academic systems	124
5.6	Summary	126

## Chapter 6 - Reflections- The Value of the University Experience

6.1	Introduction	129
6.2	Institutional Retention and Attrition	130
	6.2.1 Mainstreamed Literature	130
	6.2.2 Non-Traditional Student Literature	133
6.3	Academic Achievements	136
6.4	Financial Loss or Gain?	139
6.5	The Development of “Self”	142
6.6	Summary	146

## PART III - THE TOOLS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

### Chapter 7 – Key Themes Emerging from the Literature

7.1	Introduction	148
7.2	Purpose <i>versus</i> Expectations ( <i>relating to Chapter 4</i> )	148
	7.2.1 Purpose	148
	7.2.2 Individual Motivation and Expectations	149
	7.2.3 Political and Philosophical Tensions	150
7.3	Bonding ( <i>relating to Chapter 5</i> )	152
	7.3.1 Developing Identity	152
	7.3.2 Integration	152
	7.3.3 Fit – Identifying Peers	153

7.3.4	Discourses	154
7.3.5	Challenges	154
7.3.6	The Interface with Academic Systems	155
7.4	Reflections ( <i>relating to Chapter 6</i> )	155
7.4.1	Retention/Attrition threats	155
7.4.2	Academic Achievements	156
7.4.3	Loss or Gain?	156
7.4.4	Development of “Self”	157
7.5	Summary	158
Chapter 8	Methodology and Method	
8.1	Introduction	160
8.2	The Process of Choosing a Methodological Paradigm	161
8.3	Constructionism/Constructivism	165
8.4	Researcher Involvement	168
8.5	Ethics	170
8.6	Participant Selection	171
	8.6.1 Students	171
	8.6.2 Staff	173
8.7	Participant Response	174
	8.7.1 Students	174
	8.7.2 Staff	175
8.8	Method	175
	8.8.1 Personal Documentary Data: Journals (Students)	175
8.9	Analysis of Journals	177
8.10	Semi-Structured Interviews	180
	8.10.1 Students	180
	8.10.2 Staff	182
8.11	Credibility and Dependability	183
8.12	Summary	184

## PART IV - DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

Chapter 9	Purpose <i>versus</i> Expectations	
9.1	Introduction	186
9.2	Views on Purpose	187
	9.2.1 Shared Staff Understandings	187
	9.2.2 Governors	188
	9.2.3 Managers	189
	9.2.4 Academics	190
	9.2.5 Mature Students	190
9.3	Expectations and Motivation	192
	9.3.1 Staff Expectations of Students	193
	9.3.2 Mature Student Expectations of a Degree from an Ancient	196
	9.3.2.1 Lifestyle Betterment/Financial Rewards	196
	9.3.2.2 Employment Rewards	198
	9.3.2.3 Psychological Benefits	200
	9.3.2.4 “ <i>Escape</i> ”	201
	9.3.3 Supporting Influences for Students	202
	9.3.3.1 Political Pressure	203
	9.3.3.2 Family	203
	9.3.3.3 Publicity	205
	9.3.3.4 Personal Contacts	206
9.4	Political and Philosophical Tensions	206
	9.4.1 Academic Standards	207
	9.4.2 Managerialism	208
	9.4.3 Inclusion	211
9.5	Key findings	213
	9.5.1 Purpose	214
	9.5.1.1 University purpose: staff/student mismatch 1	214
	9.5.1.2 University, a precursor for employment: staff/student mismatch 2	214
	9.5.1.3 “ <i>Ideology</i> ”: additional university purpose	214

9.5.1.4	The place of research	215
9.5.1.5	Acceptance of “Good Individuals”, but rejection of a “Good Society”	215
9.5.1.6	Universities rely on an interdependency of purposes	215
9.5.2	Expectations	
9.5.2.1	The addition of a student motivational category: “Escape”	216
9.5.2.2	The “Ancient” status heavily influenced recruitment	216
9.5.2.3	A university mentor at point of application is essential	216
9.5.2.4	Post-admission, students quickly defended the academic elitism	217
9.5.2.5	The student participants’ beliefs of education fit well with the philosophy of academic staff	217
9.5.3	Tensions	
9.5.3.1	Areas of agreement between staff and student participants	217
9.5.3.2	Structural barriers – evidenced by student participants	218
9.5.3.3	Student participants fail to uphold “absolute” Academic Freedom	218
Chapter 10	Merging of Student and University – Making Connections	
10.1	Introduction	220
10.2	Developing Identity: Self-Definition	220
10.3	Integration	223
10.3.1	How Important is Social Integration?	223
10.3.2	Perceptions of Mainstream Students	225
10.4	“Fit”: Identifying Peers	228
10.5	Discourses: An Integration Tool	231
10.6	Daily Challenges for Mature Students	234
10.6.1	Daily life	235
10.6.2	Residential Concerns	238
10.6.3	Health Issues	241



10.8.5.2	Ill-Health; but student participants were reluctant to ask for help	251
10.8.6	Interface with Systems	
10.8.6.1	Joined-up systems, preparing for Mature students, are still not in place in some institutions	251
10.8.6.2	Clarification is required as to where the responsibility for entry guidance lies	251
Chapter 11	Reflections – The Value of the Experience	
11.1	Introduction	253
11.2	Retention/Attrition threats	254
11.3	Academic Achievements	259
11.4	Loss or Gain?	262
	11.4.1 Losses	262
	11.4.2 Gains	264
11.5	The Development of “Self”	267
	11.5.1 Age Awareness	267
	11.5.2 Attractiveness	269
	11.5.3 Perception of Academic Ability	270
	11.5.4 Identity	271
	11.5.5 Conflicts of Self	274
11.6	Key Findings	
	11.6.1 Retention/Attrition	275
	11.6.1.1 Considerations of withdrawal are usually in the first year	276
	11.6.1.2 If considering withdrawal, these Mature students tended to be solution-focused	276
	11.6.1.3 It is critical for the student participants to “Save Face”	276
	11.6.1.4 Attrition is influenced by external factors, not academic weakness	277
	11.6.2 Academic Achievements	

11.6.2.1	The student participants' values were reassessed post-entry	277
11.6.2.2	The student participants aimed high academically	277
11.6.2.3	External considerations dictate academic choices	277
11.6.3	Measurement: Loss or Gain?	
11.6.3.1	Loss of financial security.	278
11.6.3.2	Loss of partnership.	278
11.6.3.3	Loss of close family relations.	279
11.6.3.4	Gain of new relationships.	279
11.6.3.5	Gain of academic competence	279
11.6.3.6	“Vocational” <i>versus</i> “Employability”	280
11.6.3.7	Part-completion	280
11.6.4	The Development of “Self”	280
11.6.4.1	The lasting importance of a harmonious “Self”	281
11.6.4.2	The limiting of agency	281
11.6.4.3	The YMS participants form the most vulnerable group	281
11.6.4.4	Female participants' physical self-image	281
11.6.4.5	Self-esteem sometimes heightened in the domestic setting	281
11.6.4.6	A Degree did not equal an automatic rise in social class	282

## PART V – SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 12	Contributions and Gaps: Indicators for Future Research?	
12.1	Introduction	284
12.2	Theoretical Knowledge	284
12.2.1	Sub-Classification of the Mature Student	284
12.2.2	Research Development Pattern	285
12.2.3	Participants' Perception of Purpose	286
12.2.4	Student Motivations	287
12.2.5	The Advantages of Diversity	287
12.2.6	Staff/Student Relations	288

12.2.7	Social Integration	288
12.2.8	Retention	289
12.2.9	Loss and Gain	290
12.2.10	Student Identity	290
12.2.11	Value Congruence	291
12.2.12	Summary of Theoretical Contributions	291
12.3	Practical Management	293
12.3.1	Purpose	293
12.3.2	Bonding	295
12.3.3	Reflection	297
12.3.4	Summary of Practical Management Contributions	299
12.4	Methodological Application	300
12.4.1	Students' Personal Journals	301
12.4.2	Interview Atmosphere	302
12.4.3	My Presence	303
12.4.4	Summary of Methodological Contributions	303
12.5	Political Debate	304
12.5.1	Specialist Institutions	304
12.5.2	Opportunities for Employability	305
12.5.3	Indiscriminate Marketing and Financial Implications	306
12.5.4	The Legitimacy of Locus for "Late-Life" Learning	308
12.5.5	Summary of Contributions to the Political Debate	309
12.6	Limitations	310
12.7	Future Research Suggestions	312
Chapter 13	The Social Construction of the Mature Student: Seven Summary Narratives	
13.1	Introduction	314
13.2	The Young Mature Student (YMS)	314
13.3	The Mid-Life Mature Student (M-LS)	319
13.4	The Late-Life Mature Student (L-LS)	323

13.5	Academics' Construction of the Mature Student	327
13.6	The Management Construction of the Mature Student	329
13.7	The Governors' Construction of the Mature Student	332
13.8	Shared Understandings	334
	13.8.1 Purpose	334
	13.8.2 Bonding	335
	13.8.3 Reflection	337
Chapter 14	Concluding Statement – A Personal View	339

## APPENDICES

1.	Definitions	346
2	List of Universities and HEIs in Scotland	350
3	Literature Search Method	351
4	Mature Student Research List: 2000 - 2007	354
5	Ethics Information	361
6	Invitation Letter Template	364
7a	Ethics Consent Form for Student Participants	3668
7b	Ethics Consent Form for Staff Participants	368
8	Journal Reflection Points	370
9	Code List	372
10 a/b	Two Stage Analysis Maps	373/4
11	Interview Questions, 2 <sup>nd</sup> stage	375
12	Student Vignettes	377
13	Summary of Thesis Contributions	389

## REFERENCES

## **PART I – THE CONTEXT**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Introduction**

##### **1.1 The Driving Force**

In 1999, a then Student Adviser in an “Ancient” university<sup>1</sup> in Scotland<sup>2</sup>, I began this study. As is to be expected, my motivation was a personal one. Up until that point my advisory role had placed me in regular contact with students at the University who were not from mainstreamed<sup>3</sup> recruitment and so, for many years, I ascribed to the fundamental belief that their experiences were of benefit to them. That belief was at the core of my commitment to my role. It provided job satisfaction; I felt critical in facilitating a change in their world for the better.

By 1999, however, unsettling doubts had crept in: I had concerns about the implementation of government directives to encourage, what appeared to me at that time to be virtually *everyone* to take up Higher Education (HE).<sup>4</sup> In particular I found myself looking increasingly for reassurance with regard to Mature students. I watched other non-traditional students; those from ethnic minority backgrounds, with disabilities, from low socio-economic groups, blossoming within the university, integrated well, welcomed in the residential setting and progressing to obtain satisfying employment with their degrees. However, the experience for Mature students seemed different; benefits to them were less obvious, certainly within the time frame of their study with us. Some faced particular hardship, financial strains, family struggles. Others juggled their lives and conflicting responsibilities daily; they battled with public transport commuting back and forwards and looked harassed constantly. Nevertheless, at graduation I, along with

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<sup>1</sup> The accepted definition of an “Ancient” university is one which received chartered status prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Further information is contained in Appendix 1 listing definitions

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth known as “the university”. The general term of “university” is defined, again, in Appendix 1

<sup>3</sup> “Mainstreamed” - Refer to Appendix 1 - Definitions

<sup>4</sup> “HE” - Refer to Appendix 1 - Definitions

other colleagues, showered well-earned congratulations on the students but secretly took pride in having been part of the process where HE had enhanced the lives of all those students crossing the stage. Personal contact ended thereafter, and, in our blissful ignorance, we never doubted that their ongoing lives were felt by them to be “better”. However, I was unaware of evidence or research being undertaken to support our assumptions.

Feeding my newfound doubts, in 1998, “*Harry*”<sup>5</sup>, a local tradesman aged approximately 50, came to service some equipment at my home. A few years earlier I knew he had taken four years out from being self-employed to study and graduate from the university with a first class degree in a liberal arts subject. I asked how he had enjoyed the study experience. He was unhappy and bitter.

His expectations had been that university would be “*life changing*”, and, critically, would open up employment opportunities. University was to be the solution to the problem of a currently unsatisfying job role, despite the intensive financial investment. However, he described how he had been “*encouraged forcefully*” to pursue a subject which had no direct, obvious, vocational application. The natural aptitude he had displayed in that subject was an irrelevance to him. Having completed his course, he was now utterly disenchanted with any idea of HE for Mature students. With a geographically static family, he described himself as “wedged” in the small Scottish town of his birth, with few career opportunities related to his academic qualifications and had ultimately reverted to working in his original trade to produce the necessary family income. He described HE as having made him “*much worse off*” in many ways. His reasoning came through four simple assertions:

1. He now owed “*a fortune*” to the bank, with student loans, bank overdrafts, and four years’ loss of earnings.

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<sup>5</sup> All names in this thesis have been anonymised to respect individuals’ privacy and in respect of the Ethical agreement with participants (see Appendix 7)

2. He had always suspected he had the intellect to go to University. He had now proved this and thus his path into an apprenticeship at 17 had been clearly wrong and the conclusion was that he'd wasted over 20 years of his life.
3. His lack of success in the employment market assured him that he was "*on the scrapheap*" of employment. He now felt, quite suddenly, "old" and continuing to waste the rest of his employed life.
4. The experience had set him apart from many of his old friends and family who could not understand why he had taken these four years out of work and tried "*to talk fancy talk*". However he had not identified with many of the other more traditional students either so he now felt "in no man's land" and unable to communicate with anyone comfortably.

He concluded that people, particularly politicians, had "*lied*" to him, encouraging him to believe that HE would make his life better. He described himself as having been "*a puppet in some idealistic governmental experiment*" but had now been placed right back where he started, albeit all the more aware of his life in which he was now a misfit and with a huge debt.

The man parted before I had the chance to offer him an alternative interpretation of his experience. However his conclusions led me to reflect, over some months, what expectations he had developed. I was intrigued as to how his self-reflection took responsibility away from him, particularly curious at his interface with the information he had absorbed at the time he faced critical choices, given by people with different expectations, perhaps, or at least different agendas.

It led to me questioning my own role in being perceived as supporting a strategy encouraging unlimited participation in HE and, ultimately, it became the driving force behind this study. In the case of a relatively remote, residential, Scottish Ancient University, why did it admit Mature students at all? Did the managers interpret the act as offering something synonymous with their mission, or, a

disquieting thought, were we really all part of a social engineering experiment as my graduate tradesman suspected? Was there a cultural mismatch between the Mature students' beliefs and those of an institution focusing on young, residential, school-leavers? Particularly within the Scottish Ancient, did the students interpret the service they received and the benefits they identified from this Ancient as justifiable for the sacrifices they understood they would have to make? What meanings did both parties take away from the experience of interacting with each other? Encompassing these thoughts, the key research question developed:

*“What theoretical and policy lessons can be learned from a qualitative study of the Mature Student experience in an Ancient University?”*

The context for the study, however, could be described as changing, fluid or even turbulent.

## **1.2 Context - The HE Expansion**

Although the percentage of young people entering universities could be described as having grown steadily between 1960 and 1985, its subsequent pattern can only be described as having exploded. There are currently over 2 million higher education students in the United Kingdom (UK), with increasing “*wider access*” remaining the declared mission of the Education department (HEFCE, 2005). In addition, as an employer itself, Higher Education (HE) employs over 31,000 people in Scotland (Universities-Scotland, 2005). Therefore, having started life as a small cluster of scholarly centres of learning, a large industry has been established, central to the economy of Scotland.

The growth is not a mere Scottish phenomenon, but an international trend. A classic formulation defining the growth came as early as 1974 from Trow in a seminal paper to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifying systems as having an “elite”, “mass” or “universal” character according to the percentage of young people leaving school and of working age attending a

Higher Education Institute (HEI)<sup>6</sup>. Trow's formula labelled the UK as a "mass" system of HE when, in 1988, the number of enrolled students in UK higher education as a whole had reached 15% of school-leavers. Within 5 years, between 1987 and 1992 the participation rate almost doubled from 14.6% to 27.8% (Scott, 1995:5). The trend looked set to continue, however, with the present Westminster government aiming for a 50% participation rate throughout the whole of the UK by the year 2010. In Scotland, however the full effects of the trend was felt acutely when the number of universities passed the 40 per cent mark in 1996, thus classified as "universal". Using the Age Participation Index (API)<sup>7</sup> registering 17% of school leavers entering higher education in 1980, Scotland, by 2001, acquired a figure of 52% (Universities-Scotland; 2004a).

By 2007 the number of universities and HE colleges in the UK reached 131; almost three quarters of these having been established during the past four decades.

### **1.3 Context - Diversity in HE**

Alongside the increase in HE participation in terms of sheer numbers, the critical factor in Scotland's growth has been the HE curriculum offered with Further Education<sup>8</sup> (FE) colleges, attracting a large diversity of students from a wide range of backgrounds. However, the rate of social inclusion in Ancients has not been so successful. Christie *et al*, (2005) show that, if students from a diverse background transfer from FE colleges to university, they tend to enter Post-1992 universities, while Gallacher (2006: 366) confirms that, despite expansion, fundamental

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<sup>6</sup> Although a university is always a "Higher Education Institution" (HEI), the term "Higher Education Institution" is not always describing a university. HEIs include all colleges and universities offering HE courses. A list of these in Scotland is attached in Appendix 2.

<sup>7</sup> Age Participation Index definition (Scottish Executive, 2004) for a given year is defined as the number of Scots aged under 21 who enter HE for the first time in that year taken as a percentage of the population of 17 year olds at 31 December in the same year. In simple terms it is an estimate of the share of 17 year olds in the population who will enter HE for the first time before their 21st birthday.

<sup>8</sup> Further Education is defined by the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 and is outlined in Appendix 1, Definitions.

inequalities in the student profile still exist in Scottish HE, perhaps even to the point of creating patterns of stratification within the HE system. Reay (1998) examines the mismatch between working-class “*habitus*” (Bourdieu, 1988) and the middle class educational setting with Osborne (2003) noting that, from the university perspective, students entering Ancient, traditional universities are twice as likely to come from “middle” or “upper” class families as those starting in the Post-1992 sector of institutions.

Do the students from lower socio-economic groups choose to avoid “elite” institutions or are they discriminated against at admissions? Logically it would seem that the student may discriminate him/her self with their choice of institution (Tett, 1999) but it may also be the reluctance of “elite” institutions to accept alternative qualifications on entry. Some studies have highlighted undeniable deterrents to university engagement including the significant financial investment (Gorard and Taylor, 2001) but widespread unfairness at admissions stage has been denied with focus redirected at the possibility of secondary schools’ inequity at the earlier stage of gaining qualifications Gorard (2005). It would be naïve to assume that all schools have the same degree of access to quality teaching of appropriate subjects and at a relevant level to give eligibility to university admission. Inconsistency at this level would give one clear justification for non-standard qualifications as worthy of recognition.

The expansion of the sector has been achieved on the principle of social inclusion but it is vital to distinguish between the *ideas* of social inclusion and just including everybody without applying appropriate criteria. UNESCO<sup>9</sup> (2005) defines “Inclusive Education”:

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<sup>9</sup> The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

*“Inclusive education is a developmental approach seeking to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion”*

The emphasis is to address learning needs which would be appropriate to the intellectual capability of each person: the individual should be encouraged to reach their potential within the education sector in Scotland as a whole, including nursery and primary education. I was struck by the difference between that and the expectation that everyone has the ability to operate within education at tertiary level. Furthermore, the implication in government ideology is that social inclusion should be focused at integration and acceptance once initial criteria for admission (in the case of universities, appropriate academic qualifications) are filled. Exclusion on grounds other than academic standards is unacceptable to the vision of government and, although a vision aiming for academic excellence from whichever social sector the applicant comes, it is the procedures adopted to fulfil this vision, which would appear to be contentious. The procedures are increasingly government-directed.

#### **1.4 Context - Accountability of the HE Sector**

Since 1980, holding what they see as the people’s mandate, the Government uses the public purse to fund university provision. But with rights comes responsibility and legislation is a useful tool to ensure accountability. A series of legislative pressures placed on “public authorities”, (the legal category in which universities are now classified) underpins funding pressures. It can be argued that the expectations and prejudices of British society have developed alongside the growth of the welfare state, anti-discrimination legislation and a human rights agenda since the 1990s. The implementation of new equality legislation in the UK [addressing discrimination in terms of Disability (1995), Race (2000), Sexual Orientation and Religion (2003), Age (2006) and Gender (2007)] with the appointment of numerous monitoring bodies (combined on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2007 into the overarching Equality and Human Rights Commission) has put pressure on all universities to ensure that no unlawful discrimination occurs on the grounds of race, sex or disability. A key consideration in the legislation attempts to redistribute the balance of power away

from the institutions to give rights to those whose lives it affects, including staff, trade unions, local townspeople, academic networks, and students, prospective, current and alumni. It sounds a straightforward process; one that rights wrongs and always offers a positive outcome. However, the process is neither straightforward nor necessarily positive.

I would assert that some within British society are beginning to struggle with the long-held belief that people who go to university have better lives. A university education has been equated with more powerful status, more interesting jobs, and higher wages. The Labour (United Kingdom [UK]) Government's dual agenda of "lifelong learning" and "social inclusion" has encouraged return at any age to university and this has been explicit in funded initiatives both institutionally and individually. I was intrigued to note that the media arguments for this concept seemed founded on the principle that the needs of the nation are paramount (Futureskills, 2006:6) while the motivations of the students were largely ignored. In individual terms, further references included the temptation of increased employability (Futureskills, 2006: 29). However, what has been missing from these debates was any mention of the non-economic benefits to the individual. Debates on individual and institutional purpose were also excluded. The policy design and strategic direction of HEIs marched on in compliance with the "social inclusion" agenda in the belief that it was what the economy needed and that there would be eventual economic gains for participants. Some educationalists noted that, within the context of a strict social agenda combined with economic and accountability demands, the ultimate impact on student learning and academic practice could have become somewhat neglected (Mills, 2004; 222). I have taken this perspective further, being concerned that some insight to the student experience should not be limited to the learning environment if policy is to be informed. Additionally, I aimed to *understand* the processes, with meanings, that a Mature student interacted with, and not just *describe* them.

## 1.5 The Focus of this Study

Given my own family and work commitments, this study was embarked upon part-time. Undertaken over a period of 8 years, legislation along the way forced changes in the public perception of non-traditional students. A particularly relevant change occurred in 2006 with the re-categorisation of “Mature” students. Until that point the definition was straightforward with students over the age of 21 being put into this classification. In 2006, however, new Age Discrimination Legislation introduced another category of diversity for institutions to give particular focused consideration and marking this study as timely. Although directly relevant to employment legislation, best practice urged each institution to consider, from 2007, the re-categorisation of their students by the new labelling of “Independent”<sup>10</sup>, a term introduced by the Scottish Awards Agency of Scotland. All “Mature” students would be within this larger category, but not all “Independent” students would be “Mature”.

The change in terminology caused some difficulty for me, coming, as it did, after the majority of this thesis had been completed. To acknowledge this I drew a timeline at 2007 restricting the study to “Mature”<sup>11</sup> students only. Having identified the “Mature” focus in quantitative terms, using a Social Constructionist lens brought further qualitative interpretations of the term. Relating to others, each actor has a unique understanding of what being a Mature student means and the term itself thus gets reshaped with dialogue and interactions. The effect of these relationships became a fundamental focus of this study.

The perceptions of what should be taking place within universities, indeed, what a university is *for*, opened up areas of Philosophy worthy of exploration while questioning how to introduce diversity to such a traditional system took my research into fields of Management. The evaluation of the benefit, relying on individual

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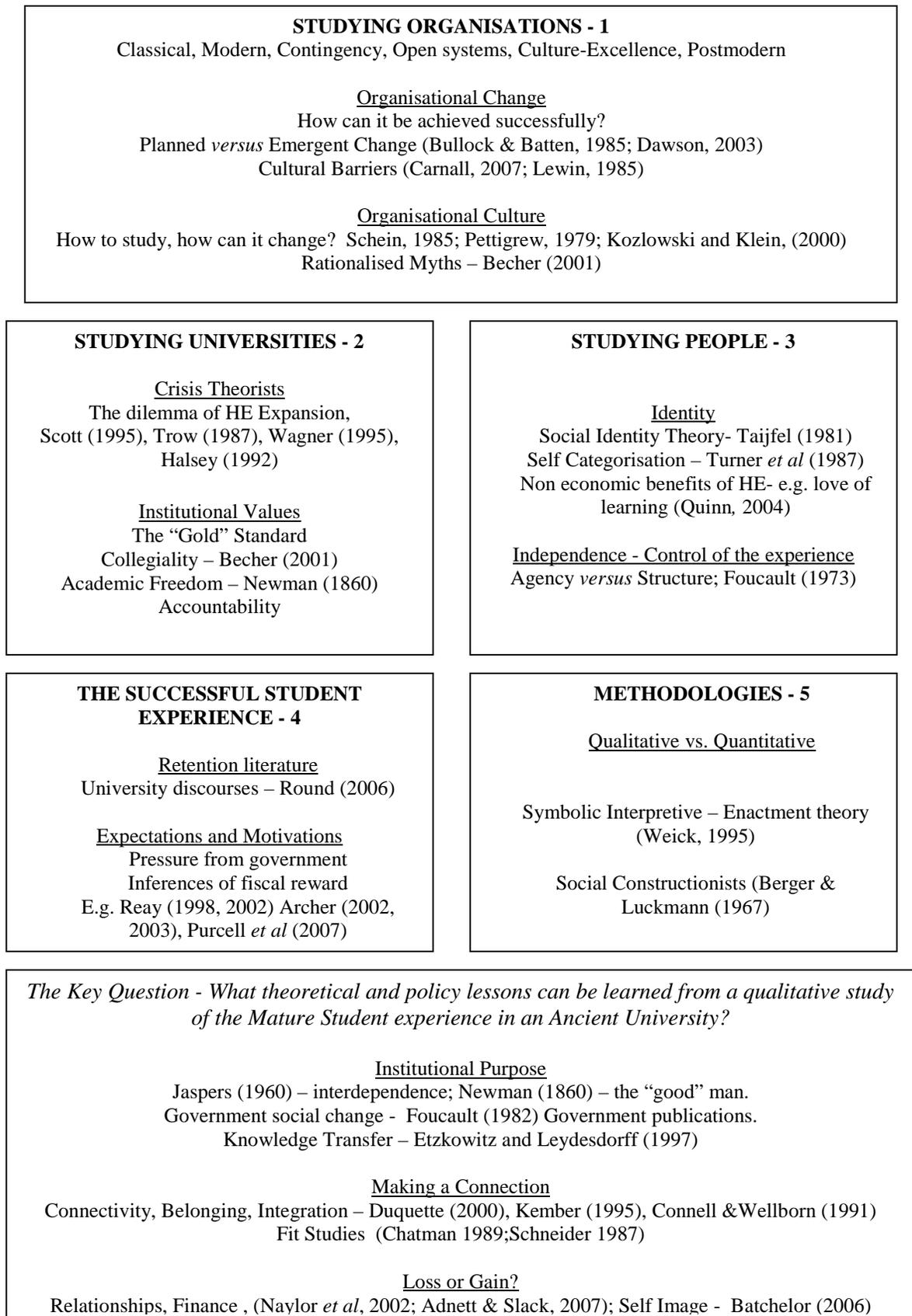
<sup>10</sup> For definition of an “Independent” student, see Appendix 1– “Definitions” (reference : - Student Awards Agency of Scotland, 2007)

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 1 for Definitions

understandings of loss or gain, and how people identify themselves led me into the work of Psychologists.

At the outset I acknowledged that exploration could lead to engagement in areas of theoretical debate. In researching the literature, a search method was adopted as outlined in Appendix 3. Grouped in clusters, some of the more obvious areas of focus were initially mapped with examples of pertinent theoretical and empirical literature. These are highlighted in Figure 1, with the main theoretical debate focus for this study featured in the final box:

**Figure 1 – Areas of Theoretical Debate**



Focusing on one particular role, that of the student, this study offers to contribute to four different areas; theory, practical management, methodology and political debate. These contributions have been extracted and outlined in the summary table in Appendix 13 (with a fuller explanation of the summary in Chapter 12).

A five-part journey through the thesis has therefore developed, with support and information supplied in the accompanying appendices.

## **1.6 The Structure of this Study**

In Part I, the contextual landscape is examined, placing this study within a framework of theoretical, historical and philosophical perspectives.

Chapter 2 examines the theoretical frameworks supporting the general study of organisations. Ultimately, the framework selected for use in this study had to relate to the data collected in the empirical section of this study, giving a sense of order to the relationships contained therein. In the search for the most comfortable theoretical context, and in seeking both ontological and empirical grounds for elimination of the rest, the net was originally cast wide and, as a result, a broad summary of the historical theoretical approaches to organisational analysis is outlined in this chapter. Finally focus rests on the Symbolic-Interpretive School of organisational theory and highlights the framework as one which will hold the structure but open doors of understanding to the data.

Chapter 3 examines the particular organisations in this study; universities. “University” is a term which has changed out of all recognition over the past 40 years and particular examination is made here of the historical, political and philosophical underpinnings of Ancient universities. Referring back to the theoretical literature of Chapter 2, the cultural influence and the resultant effect of the developed beliefs and core values are explored.

In Part II, I move on to intensify the focus on a literature review of the student experience within universities and, given the vast amount of this literature, the review is structured by three perspectives (Figure 2) on the interaction between student and university. These three provide the structural foundation on which the analysis of the original data from this study can be built with a repeat of the pattern (Part IV).

Part III brings this first half of the thesis together by summarising the themes emerging from the literature which require further examination. Key questions are identified as drawing the focus for the ongoing data collection. Different methods are then explored before establishing an appropriate one for this study, thus opening up the second half of the thesis, the empirical sections.

Part IV elucidates the original contribution of the study, by highlighting new knowledge, or different perspectives on old themes as collected in fresh data. Revisiting the previous pattern delineating the three perspectives of the interaction between student and university (see Figure 2), the data is interpreted with multi dimensional analysis. Indicators found to be significant are considered while retaining awareness of the original study aims prompted by the study questions.

Part V draws together the threads of the data collected and, reflecting this back to the literature reviews, concludes by suggesting seven different socially constructed views of the Mature student. An analysis of the contribution made by the study<sup>12</sup> leads, as is typical of much research, to raising more questions which beg attention. The final conclusions therefore offer suggested routes for future expansion of the study area.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 13 for summary table of contributions

**Figure 2 – Three perspectives of interaction**

<p><b>PURPOSE <i>versus</i> EXPECTATIONS</b></p>	<p><b>BONDING</b> the Student and the University</p>	<p><b>REFLECTIONS</b> Measuring the Experience</p>
<p><b>Before the interaction</b></p> <p>Examining the concept of “PURPOSE”</p> <p>How have theorists, policy makers, practitioners and participants described the purpose of a university?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• from the perspective of society?</li> <li>• The institutional staff view?</li> <li>• According to Mature students?</li> </ul> <p>What have researchers found motivating Mature students to enter HE?</p> <p>Are there tensions with and between the different perspectives?</p> <p><b>Study Aims:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To highlight the distinction of perspectives on university purpose between different actors in the arena.</li> <li>• To identify the areas of tension between major players in the experience</li> <li>• Use motivation as a means of categorising Mature students.</li> </ul> <p>The current literature explores purposes of HE, but this study aims to link the institutional purpose distinctly of an Ancient to the offer made to a Mature student. Emphasis will be given to critically examining expectations on both sides of the interaction, something not brought together in the current literature.</p>	<p><b>During the interaction</b></p> <p>Examining the concept of “CONNECTION”</p> <p>The theory reveals similar, but individual, concepts describing the process of an individual connecting with an institution, ranging from “Connectivity” (Kember, 1995), to “Belonging” (Connell and Wellborn, 1991) and the creation of an “In-Group”</p> <p>How does the process work and what tools can assist? What barriers can hinder?</p> <p>How do we know that a connection has been made?</p> <p><b>Study Aims:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To highlight areas of vulnerability in integration, possibly informing policy</li> <li>• To question if Mature students even <i>want</i> to bond</li> <li>• To offer a qualitative approach, exploring the meaning of the experience to the actors</li> <li>• To examine concepts such as agency and structure in the integration process.</li> </ul> <p>The current literature has questioned some assumptions we make about non-traditional student integration. This study will aim to identify appropriate integration strategies which are particularly important to Mature students, thus adding to that literature.</p>	<p><b>Reflections on the interaction</b></p> <p>Examining the concept of “VALUE”</p> <p>Theorists working on the loss and gain from the Mature student experience are examined. Much has been written on academic loss or gain and research into retention is plentiful. However the value extends beyond academic or employment terms alone.</p> <p>What other areas of personal development can bring loss or gain?</p> <p>Does a course of HE change the self identification or categorisation of Mature students?</p> <p><b>Study Aims:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To examine how the experience is interpreted in depth, from the personal, individual perspective.</li> <li>• To extend the quantitative retention focus to include non-academic experience</li> <li>• Focusing on non-economic benefits of HE</li> <li>• Examining HE as a self development process rather than the degree gain only.</li> </ul> <p>The current literature is focusing predominantly on quantitative gains, for example degree and worth in terms of financial gain. This study will focus on qualitative perceptions of the students themselves in terms of less obvious losses and gains.</p>

Throughout this study, I have been aware that I personally carry considerable information and knowledge of these matters through my professional role within the university. Far from making the study easier, changing from the subjective to objective stance required regular self-reflection and monitoring. For example, recognising my motivation, I had a heightened awareness of my possible bias in any given situation, and this led me to deeply question any latent personal desire to see particular outcomes from the data collection. Although the summary section will elaborate, at this point I will admit to two outcomes of this research:

1. The results are absolutely not as I would have expected at the beginning, and,
2. The experience of undertaking this study evolved into a much wider and self-actualising project than I had intended. In fact, the journey, rather than the outcome, became the focus; a realisation which carries some ironic parallels with my participants, as will be shown in the final Part V.

## Chapter 2

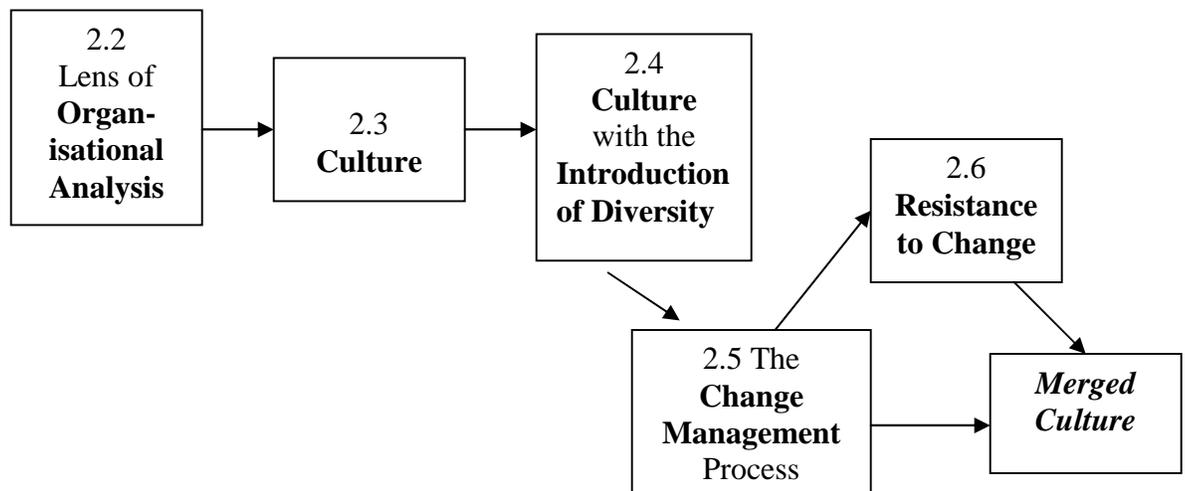
### Analysing Organisations - Theoretical Frameworks

#### 2.1 Introduction

*“It is important that research within a university takes into consideration studies of organizational theory applied to the university as an organization. This provides a framework for understanding and analysis of the nature and functioning of such processes for change” (Lockwood and Davies, 1985:26)*

Lockwood and Davies’ observation is acutely relevant; in studying the role of the individual within any organisation, theories frame and link the key concepts in the interactive process between the two. Considering the particular Ancient and traditional format of the university in the study, alongside the non-traditional perspective of Mature students, both factors in the equation share a common ground in that they each carry cultural beliefs acquired through experience and age. The theories and organisational analyses of specific interest here are those offering perspectives to view and manage change at the point of interaction of these two very different cultures, the flow of this chapter being demonstrated in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3**



## **2.2 The University as an Organisation**

Given their multifaceted, complex nature, and their variety of formats, universities are not easy environments to define or evaluate. Various authors (Hassard and Parker, 1993; Hatch, 1997; Morgan, 1997) have used the multiple perspective approach to assist them in analysing similar organisations, but this approach poses problems of limitation. If trying to use a single perspective as a key to understanding them, other theorists (Pfeffer, 1997; Mintzberg, 1983) have developed frameworks in their work which used the descriptions of organisations as political systems.

A conglomerate of sub-units with idiosyncratic responses to issues, the management structure of the traditional university model has been interpreted, for example by Mintzberg & Quinn (1988) through what they term the “Professional Bureaucracy Model”. The model fits organisations who choose employees within the ranks to lead certain groups of employees on a rotational basis, but who, after managing an allocated team for some time, will then return to the rank and file. Within universities the model fits with academic members of staff who take it in turn to be Head of School, to return after a period of time to the role of “foot soldiers”. However there are disadvantages with this managerial structure, for confidence in the management by “one of their own kind” is balanced with lack of managerial expertise at the top leading to a susceptibility to bias and a lack of authority recognition by peers.

A theoretical framework was required to guide and offer a lens through which to direct the thesis development. The “Symbolic-Interpretive” school of thought was ultimately adopted but this decision was arrived at by first considering three other major categories which have emerged in the history of organisational analysis: Classical, Modernist, Postmodern.

### 2.2.1 Classical/Modernist/Postmodern Analysis

Exploration of the Classical school, thriving in the factory setting, saw the application of the sociological work of Durkheim (1949), Weber (1947) and Marx (1954) to examine the contribution of organisations to the economy and society through the influence of industrialisation on the role and experiences of workers. The functions of management (Fayol, 1949) developed from this school of thought which focused on mechanical rules, procedures, an obedient workforce and “scientific” analysis of challenges (Taylor, 1911). The logical consequence of alienated, unmotivated workers with low morale and lack of liberal thinking (Braverman, 1974; Morgan, 1997) jars with the University setting and academic minds seeking alternative ideas. The evolution of analysis into the Human Relations school developed from the recognition of the organisation as a complex social system (Maslow, 1943; Mayo, 1949; McGregor, 1960; Bennis *et al*, 1970). Central studies in Human Relations included the study of the effect of human contact and the influence of special attention on the outcome of the data (for example the Hawthorne experiments [Mayo, 1949]). This was to become an important consideration for me as someone undertaking research as a student while still maintaining a fairly high staff profile in the institution.

Moving away from the rigidity of the Classical school, the literature from the Modernist theorists acknowledged the multi-faceted and reactive face of organisations and the fluid nature of change within them. Contingency theorists (e.g. Fiedler, 1967; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969) argued there is no “one best style” of management for all organisations but that individual identity (based on technology, size, history, norms and environment) dictates appropriate change mechanisms. Evolutions of the Modernist school included the “Culture-Excellence” approach (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Peters and Austin, 1985; Handy, 1986; Kanter, 1990) and the Group Dynamics school of thought (Hendrick, 1987; Uhlfelder, 1995) but the Open Systems School (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Woodward, 1965; Katz and Kahn, 1978) is perhaps the most relevant within the university setting. Crucially emphasising the inter-dependence of sub-systems within the organisation it stressed

the consequent multiplied reactions to actions occurring and the combined effect greater than a simple sum of its individual parts. The Open Systems has some relevance to the university setting, open to the external environment (ecological, social, technological, governmental) and internally with the pull of faculties, schools, departments each with their individual clients but with interdependent effects. This approach was useful as a background influence on the prioritisation of connections and interacting relationships within the institution.

The third category, Postmodernism, was perhaps the most difficult for me to apply. To define this as one perspective is inappropriate for (while at the risk of being accused of negativity) it is perhaps more efficient to say what postmodernism is *not* rather than what it is. A collective expressing a diversity of ideas and theories, Postmodernism deconstructs what is regarded as the “illusions” of reality, redefining social constructions through individual personal reflection (Foucault, 1980; Peron & Peron, 2003; Boje, Gephart & Thatchenkery, 1996). While questioning all assumptions and denying any absolute notion of “truth”, within the setting of this study postmodernism could be used to describe the social changes which are held to be challenging the traditional educational format within HE. Personally I have found Postmodernist analysis has many attractions by reflecting the complexity and dynamism of society. However, it does also invoke a certain anxiety within me. The simplicity of the modernist theories seem unsatisfying, but the postmodernists, in a reaction to the former, have produced seemingly limitless combinations of possible dynamics questioning everything which creates an exhaustion which can paralyse rather than energise the debate.

Thus, by elimination, I arrived at the consideration of the Symbolic-Interpretive perspective of organisations.

### 2.2.2 Symbolic Interpretive Perspective

This sociological perspective encompasses several theories including Weick’s Enactment Theory (Weick, 1995) and The Social Construction of Reality Theory

(Berger and Luckmann, 1967). The perspective became the one that I viewed as most relevant for this study, (the process of coming to this decision will be discussed more in Chapter 8 examining my methodology). The Symbolic Interpretive perspective broadly recognises that society is constructed through negotiations between people with shared experiences and histories. The actions are of less importance than the interpretation by the people encountering such actions. In the context of relevance to a study set within the university environment, and in view of my motivation described in Chapter 1, it may be understandable that I wanted to understand how people made sense of their lives. I wanted to know how they perceived the power relations, and formed bonds, with others and delineated their ideas of what is legitimate and what not. Social Constructionists, acknowledging unwritten, but received and accepted, rules and interpretations of language used within society, place significance on identified and defined subjects. Brown *et al*, (2005) used narrative practices to analyse organisational identity, particularly in terms of linguistic constructs. I was attracted to the cognitive entity which I understood from Humphreys & Brown, (2002a) describing the organisation as pluralistic “*accomplishment*”, with simultaneous and sequential understandings of discourses, often multi-layered and diverse, and for me an extension of Berger & Luckmann (1966) who talked about the organisation developing out of language interaction in processes of networking, negotiation and exchange. The perspective proposes that every person within a situation, manager, employee, student, plays the role as an actor, creating their own realities running parallel to, and crossing over, each other in their overall mental construction of the situation (Beech and Cairns, 2001). For me, it reminded of an ontological honesty, accepting that I would be inside the research zone but being aware of the danger of bias and using self-awareness as a shield against influence. It explored the life within an organisation, rather than concentrating on the structure. In all senses, this Social Constructionist perspective began to feel a comfortable framework.

Crucial to the study of the university as an organisation was a focus of organisational culture, in my view the critical heart of any organisation. The culture is identified as the source of the organisation's belief system, the priorities of the people within, the values which guide the way tasks are undertaken and the processes adopted (Schein, 1985). However, in practical terms, culture can be a complex concept to quantify or even, initially, to recognise and theorists have struggled with its identification for years.

### **2.3 Organisational Culture**

The late 1970s saw the growth of analysis of the relationship between organisation and culture (Pettigrew, 1979; Peters, 1978). Organisational behaviourists debated the definition of the concept (Pettigrew, 1979; Kozlowski and Klein, 2000) and tried to understand its use (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). Schein, in his core text reflecting on the concept, described it as the habits, ways of organising work and of ordering daily life (Schein, 1985). Culture was also shown to cover areas such as traditions, history, size, and the cherished philosophies of the members within. Culture was identified as a potentially effective means for providing guidance and cohesiveness throughout an organisation (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and the shaping of culture as the primary challenge for management (Pettigrew, 1979) for, as some, (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Pascale and Athos, 1981), highlighted an organisation could have an advantage if it had solid embedded shared values.

Interestingly, developing these broad descriptions, theorists refined their definitions according to their own cultural influences and background. Burns and Stalker (1961: 138), within their "Excellence" model, offered culture as a tool to define:

*"the disparity between ideas of what is worthwhile in one's career or in one's life, or of proper conduct at work or elsewhere"*

Charles Handy suggested it set down the degrees of formalisation required, what importance was laid on work hours, dress expected in the workplace, rewards and incentives anticipated, a shared private language. He went on to note (1986: 183):

*“the way of life is enshrined in rituals so that rule books and manuals are almost unnecessary; custom and tradition provide the answers.....strong pervasive cultures turn organizations into cohesive tribes with distinctly clannish feelings”.*

Schein (1985) suggested a framework for understanding how the concept develops beginning with what he called “fundamental assumptions”. This then became a value, shared with others and placed within belief systems throughout the institution. Actions developed out of these values, establishing behavioural norms. Finally, on the surface of the organisation, Schein called the overt rituals followed “Artifacts”. Many theorists throughout this area of literature adopted Schein’s model (Rousseau, 1990; Martin and Siehl, 1983; Weiner, 1988).

A critical debate within the study of organisational culture examined two perspectives; culture as an internal variable; something the organisation *is*, or culture as a mature variable, something the organisation *has* (Smircich, 1983). The differentiation was one of culture being regarded as a means of explaining differences between various subgroups, rather than culture as an organisational unity. Equating a strong organisation with a strong culture, Schein described how, as an organisation matured, the process of knitting together the warring factions and sub cultures strengthened it. This portrayal can be interestingly placed alongside the 600-year history of the Ancient within this study, which has had the time to mould and develop a more concentrated, stronger, culture.

Given this widespread acknowledgement of importance, it would seem essential for organisational management seeking success to pay close heed to culture and its influences. Achieving congruence of focus and goals can include the enforcement of congruence of entrants’ ideas and patterns of development, or “making them fit” as discussed in the fit theorists’ work (Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987) which is discussed in focus in Chapter 5. Kirkton and Greene (2000:74) reinforced this with their “*hegemony of organizational culture*”, a described heavy pressure for individuals joining an organisation to conform with the existing norms within, the

change being expected entirely from the individual rather than expecting any adjustment on behalf of the organisation.

However, Schein (1985) has gone on to caution that a strong culture will necessarily lead an organisation to resist change. This refers back to Smirchirch's earlier debate for, before a deterministic defeatism is adopted, belief that it is fundamentally possible for the culture to be changed at all would be essential. With no recognition of new, individual contributions, the danger of stagnancy of an organisation is real. If a particular characteristic of an organisation is identified as encouraging stagnancy in an operational culture, the introduction of diversity, or diverse members, can be used by the management to progress towards alternative aims. Diversity of recruitment of organisational members will necessarily mean an influence on the culture of each of the parties and therefore the "war" of these, with the subsequent winner, involves a process which is neither simple nor straightforward.

#### **2.4 Introducing Diverse Membership to an Organisation**

Given that this study focuses on the introduction of non-traditional students to an established strong culture, the literature surrounding specific and deliberate change within an organisation is important, including examining the possible methods used and the pitfalls of the process. Using diverse membership as a progressive move is one such method. By deliberately introducing an alternative recruitment target group, the management has to review the organisation's flexibility, and refocus, in depth, its culture and belief systems to include or exclude the newcomer. It sounds a complex process, almost as if a manager would be expected to lift a lid off "Pandora's Box" with the fear that everything that had been holding the institution together may unravel.

Yet organisations do change. Managers do cope with unexpected forces and steer the organisation accordingly exercising a great deal of control especially focusing, and timing, the organisation's adjustment. Their motivations for the choice of

which problem to concentrate on, at what time, can be rooted in personal reasoning. They can choose the format of systems and say how aims are to be achieved and it is important not to diminish the role of agency contained within any of these choices.

As Schein (1993) observes, one important way that managers can use some influence is in choosing what characteristics of an organisation to emphasise. The notion of diversity is identified by a particular, recognised, deviation from a norm. For example, although the identifying characteristic of difference is fixed in this study (*i.e.* based on age) the behaviours and norms expected by the institution will be to behave as one of the “usual” members, a young student, thus minimising the effect of the difference on the organisational culture. This looks first to the individual to make any necessary adjustment and ignores the other characteristics which might be less deviant, for example, a keen learner or a Scottish student. The diversity literature can fall into a trap of neatly categorising groups internal and external to organisations in terms of one particular set of characteristics. The groups are then identified by those characteristics alone and the homogeneity of the group assumed when analysing the effect of difference is introduced.

However, although tidy, this is not a comprehensive perspective. The objective labelling of individuals and groups takes us into a complex area which brings in theories of Social Categorization (Turner *et al*, 1994) and “In Group/Out Group” (Allport, 1954) both dependent on individual perception defining categorisation in a far-from-standardised format. Concepts such as shared beliefs, norms (Feldman, 1984) and perceived cohesiveness (Zaccaro and McCoy, 1988) offer varying group definitions. Theories in all these areas will be considered further in Chapters 5 and 6 when I focus on areas such as integration and self-esteem, both relevant to this study.

If used as a tool for managing or identifying change the study of diversity would seem, necessarily, to have to be organic and fluid. A variety of multi-faceted

differences within groups can be identified and studied as well as those which exist in between groups. The study must take account of the ever-changing self-definition in any given context rather than rely on the simplistic, objective classification by one obvious characteristic. This is only one hazard in the, already complex, use of diversity as a primary factor generating the change process, remembering Carnall (1990:123) cautioning:

*“Change is rarely neat. It is an ongoing process”.*

I now move on to a substantial body of literature within the organisational analysis field examining the management of change. This thesis is arriving at a point where the adaptation of the student entering the university to fit with its prior culture is no longer the expectation. The university is now expected to change to bring in the diversity of the wider recruitment. The pressure of change on the university will be expressed through the data collected from both students and staff in Chapters 9, 10 and 11 and so the theory surrounding institutional change is worthy of our attention at this point.

## **2.5 The Change Management Process**

Common themes emerge from the opinions of what is characteristic of change management: -

- 1. It is often disruptive and disturbing.*
- 2. Leadership at management level is essential*
- 3. Significant change involves learning*
- 4. An Open approach at all levels makes change more of a reality*
- 5. Regression back into previous patterns of working is a danger after change has initially taken place. Managing the risk of relapse is a key issue for managers. (Carnall, 1999 pp. 105 - 108)*

Identifying the triggers that stimulate or require change (including financial, market and social pressures) can direct future progress and development of an organisation. As one example, Nutley and Coventry described public sector transformations which tended to be the result of interventions from the political arm of government

and were driven by strong ideological beliefs (Nutley and Coventry, 2001). (This resonates with the political trigger of wider access faced by university management today.) Two key approaches identified for developing the Change Management process are those of “Planned” and “Emergent” Change (Nutley and Coventry, 2001).

The Planned approach has been defined and deconstructed by a number of authors (Bullock and Batten, 1985; Burnes & James, 1994) covering the analysis of where change is required within an organisation, what form the change should take and how it could be attempted, including timescales and identified participants. The Wider Access agenda within the HE sector could be one example. A three-step model developed by Lewin (1958) considered the processes of “Unfreezing, Moving and Refreezing” which are possible with the Planned approach. The “Unfreezing” section of Lewin’s model suggested confrontation and debate and a re-educating process. (I would suggest that this is the point where the HE sector in Scotland is currently, with institutions questioning Government forcing their social agenda.)

Criticism of the Planned approach starts with the obvious feature that it identifies the organisation as a simple and unified entity. The underestimating of internal power struggles and divisions, (as with sub-systems in the Open Systems model,) provides a context for a strong counter-argument. The emphasis on a top-down led approach with a beginning, middle, and end would seem to be simplistic, lending itself to the mechanistic model of organisational management and discarding with concepts of agency in those working at a lower level. In view of Carnall’s caution of the need to see change as open-ended, I, for one, would not relish the task of recognising when the end of the change has actually arrived. Nutley and Coventry (2001) also stress that research seems to lend itself better to this approach to change management.

The Emergent Change approach (Wilson, 1992; Pettigrew and Whipp 1993; Dawson, 2003) sees change as the ever constant ebb and flow as an open-ended process of adjusting an organisation to the changing environment continues on a daily basis. The role of the management team in this context is that of facilitator in creating an organisational structure and climate, which encourages and sustains experimentation and risk taking while offering a vision for the organisation.

Handy (1986) claimed that fundamental change is a long-term process and that people tend to react psychologically rather than rationally to change (recognising the human element and, I would argue, making the planned approach problematic). Control of the degree of change necessary may increase chances of success and theorists have made a distinction between incremental and radical change; the former offering a more comfortable feel with their small steps often unacknowledged on a wide scale, while the latter receives more attention than other change situations due to their invasive and spectacular nature.

Nevertheless, there are occasions when, even with careful planning and with consideration of the individuals and collective cultures involved, the management process simply cannot succeed. Possible blocks to this process cannot be underestimated as anti-cultures emerge in response to the introduction of change. This is important for us when examining the responses of staff to the introduction of non-traditional students in an Ancient institution.

## **2.6 Resistance to Change**

A variety of barriers are offered to ensure that change momentum can be halted. Theorists have referred to these in varying formats, but Carnall (1990), a key text in this area, included cultural tradition, narrow definition where the institutional perspective is the only one promoted, managers who feel they are the experts (thus resisting criticism), and organisations with internal language rejecting the language of change. He summarised five blocks to change which relate to others'

observations in terms of Perceptual, Emotional, Cultural, Environmental and Cognitive.

#### 2.6.1 Perceptual Blocks

Bullock and Batten (1985) further illustrated this barrier by offering a model in which a “diagnosis” or “exploration” stage showed difficulty in even beginning the change process. At the early point of their model many of the “leaders” of the hierarchy would believe in the culture so strongly they, themselves, would see no need for the change. Although narratives could be used to understand the need for, and processes of, organisational change (Humphreys & Brown, 2002b), Child (1984) observed that, at the end of the day, maintaining the *status quo* could still be embedded within the range of targets for that organisation. Pettigrew (1985, 1987) described the organisational change process as essentially political in that it is motivated, implemented and reinforced through serving the purpose of the dominant groups or individuals within it. The management, politically strong, would take a stance which perceived that a change is necessary in order to successfully implement it. If this did not happen, a sense of fatalism could develop with managers, with stagnancy an outcome (Huxham and Beech, 2003).

#### 2.6.2 Emotional Blocks

This barrier represents the fear of taking a risk. The risk extends to personal repercussions alongside organisational ones. Whittington (1993:130) warned that managers might actually recognise the need for change, yet still refuse to “learn” because they understand perfectly well the implications for their power and status. Resistance to change may not be “stupid”, but based on a very shrewd appreciation of the personal consequences.

### 2.6.3 Cultural Blocks

Tradition and culture have been acknowledged as very hard to overcome. The safe option for some may be to relapse into the older, familiar rules of working (linking to the necessity of the refreezing stage labelled by Lewin, 1958). The critical issue here is that the movement can be misleading for a gravitational embedded stance will make any movement partial, illusionary or temporary.

### 2.6.4 Environmental Blocks

The setting of university management can provide a strong example here: beliefs of autonomy have, in the past, allowed academics to accept and interpret policies in institutional-specific terms and to implement them in ways that suited them. Becher (2001: 24) has emphasised that academics are not victims of circumstance but are empowered to reconstruct their cultural environment by reinforcing particular actions, rewarding the reinforcement, and making it clear that resistance to change can be based on adherence to old accepted traditions. The “status quo” becomes a core value in the cultural system of the institution. Becher stressed that this process is often an unconscious one but this does not make it any less powerful. A theoretical perspective (discussed more in Chapter 3) promoted by Foucault (1980) sees institutions such as universities as social change tools utilised by external governments to deliver particular political agendas, and, if this is indeed the case, this interpretative barrier to culture change would be even more powerful.

### 2.6.5 Cognitive Blocks

If the vision, the desired changes, or the actions required, are unclear to personnel within an organisation, or if instructions are either ambiguous in nature or sit uncomfortably with individual beliefs, then further confusion or resistance was highlighted by Carnall (2007) as an obvious result. The act of interpreting policies in institutional or departmental specific ways shaped the cultural environment in an individualistic direction. Just as the manager could block the government intentions

or adjust emphasis in their interpretation, the academic staff on the ground level could develop that process further. Arguably it could be said that academics, over many centuries, may have had some ultimate restriction on action as individuals, but as communities they effectively made their own rules prioritising according to their individual institution's values and belief systems.

With relevance to this study, the senior management of universities has traditionally been chosen from the academic pool and as a result may hold perceptions true to their academic training. The belief systems of these managers could question validity of government visions, search for alternative angles, or strive for the perfect, scientific solution with exact definitions. This may lead, in some cases, to reluctance in tolerating any sense of ambiguity or compromise on the pragmatic solution. As shall be seen in the next Chapter, Carnall's (1990:40) theoretical description of barriers, when matched with the HE practitioner literature (e.g. Wagner, 1995; Trow, 1987), confirms that ancient institutions are adopting a defensive stance as they face challenge to the core of their internal, traditional cultures. The argument that the original order (outlined by Lewin, 1958) is more appropriate for their particular institution may be politically difficult for the managers or academics to support and stakeholders (including Government) require substantial evidence of tried and failed systems in order to accept refusal which can otherwise be interpreted as unjustifiable reluctance to change (Scott, 1995; Trowler 1998).

The next chapter will examine the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Ancients in order to offer a more specific organisational context to my study; describing how their cultures developed and are currently defined.

## 2.7 Summary

I would argue that the culture of the HE institution and the way in which it responds to enforced change with the introduction of a diverse market of students determines the experience offered to the student and their position within it. It also determines the meanings attached to the relationships which all the actors take from such a change. A review of theoretical frameworks, therefore, has been critical to set the context at the outset of this study. This summary will establish what analytical and theoretical tools the review in this chapter offers with which to engage with the research focus.

Starting with the overarching organisational analysis perspectives, the Classical theories were felt to give insufficient attention to agency and the emotional responses of individuals. Additionally the simple structures of the Modernist were unsatisfying while the Postmodernist, featuring the reflective reaction of an extreme, ever-questioning open structure was an extreme reaction to the Modernist, but no more satisfying for that. However attention rested upon the Symbolic-Interpretive school of organisational theory and, within that school, the model which examined the Social Construction of Reality was ultimately adopted as the most useful approach. The reasons for this choice will be more fully explored in Chapter 8, but of most significance at this point is the attraction of a tool which accounts for individual's presumptions prior to a relationship being enacted and therefore acknowledges the role of personal interpretation, influenced by prior histories and biases.

Building up the toolkit of theoretical frameworks, within organisational studies the literature focusing on culture in terms of norms, behavioural expectations, and unwritten rules, provides essential background context. The literature review introduces, in particular, the critical lens of viewing culture as an internal or independent variable of an organisation. It also identifies the analysis techniques for viewing the unique cultures of the institution in this thesis with a 600 year

history when interacting with the individual cultural beliefs of Mature students entering with considerable personal history behind them.

The response of staff to the introduction of diverse membership led us to another relevant area of theoretical literature, reminding us that the role of manager is not one of powerless victim, not least in terms of setting the strategic direction of the organisation. One tool for change available to the management is that of organisational culture and I have shown that, without addressing this, any defined change process is unlikely to be successful. The literature stresses the importance of attention to the institutional norms, beliefs and attitudes.

This chapter has explored the differing approaches of Planned and Emergent change giving some context to this study examining change approaches which may have proved successful in introducing Mature students to a young student population, highlighting initiatives which have failed and, with particular reference to Carnall's barriers (1990), indications of why.

The first search into broad literature of organisational theory has now to be set aside, albeit temporarily, since it forms the structure for the empirical study and is used as a form of reference for the data discussion later. The literature search is now narrowed to focus on the particular example of organisations at the centre of this study; universities.

## Chapter 3

### The Historical and Philosophical Underpinnings of Universities

#### **3.1 Introduction**

If we are to understand the forces of accord or discord in the cultures encountered by students, it would seem crucial to make a close examination of the university as a locus for this study. With some cynicism, Ker, a key analyst of university life, indicts the institutions as:

*“.....a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking” (Ker in Allen, 1988: 20)*

However, linking with the theoretical literature surrounding culture in the last chapter, historic and cultural influences inextricably link with the current day philosophies underpinning universities. In this chapter I examine the historical background of these organisations, and the resulting current political climate. I then concentrate on four key philosophies underpinning universities’ functions: academic standards, equal opportunities, lifelong learning, and academic freedom.

#### **3.2 The Historical Context**

Historians, (Cobban, 1975; Ruegg and de Ridder-Symoens, 1996) describe universities, traditionally the deliverers of Higher Education (HE) in the UK, as having evolved over centuries into the core establishments throughout the world today:

*“No other European institution has spread over the entire world in the way in which the traditional form of the European university has” (Ruegg, 2003:4).*

From the medieval origins embodied within a small number of universities, universities have developed in terms of size, student profiles, infrastructure design, and educational format delivery. Their historical roots, however, remain crucial to their culture.

At their creation, in Europe, the early institutions grew around a cluster of scholars, all prepared to travel for “the pursuit of Knowledge” and following one outstanding mentor or leader. The clusters became focal points for controversial debates on relevant social problems, places where scholars did not shirk from addressing religious and political disputes (Brock & Curthoys, 1998; Oxford University, 2006)<sup>13</sup>. Their intellectual interests spanned a range of foci from grammar and rhetoric to logic and metaphysics but their focus was in terms of gaining a broad education, with only a small proportion pursuing knowledge in a specialist field (Shinn, 1986:3).

Oxford University was formed in 1167 by a breakaway group of scholars from the University of Paris (on which all traditional universities in the UK are based). In contrast with Paris, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (formed by a subsequent breakaway group from Oxford) gave up the nomadic and migratory aspects of their previous institution and became adopted by their local environments. With the registering of the community of masters as a *universitas* or corporation, in Oxford and Cambridge in 1231 and 1284 respectively, a sense of permanency and official recognition attached itself to these scholarly camps. However there existed a certain naiveté of the accountability that was developing:

*“the local community would accept its jurisdiction as extending over all the institutions within its boundary, while the teachers and scholars believed they could be governed by an authority structure distinct from that of the surrounding community.” (Shinn, 1986:4)*

This is an early example of tensions between institutional and societal expectations of what a university could deliver. Following on from Oxford and Cambridge in England, four other universities developed in Scotland (St. Andrews, 1411; Glasgow, 1451; Aberdeen, 1494, and Edinburgh, 1583). Together With Dublin, Trinity College (1592) these seven universities form what is termed collectively as

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<sup>13</sup> An example of this would be Aberlard (1079 – 1142) who, it is said, effectively took the University of Paris with him wherever he went (Lunden, 1932: 93). Lunden describes this format as something resembling a “teaching guild”.

“The Ancients” concentrating on the liberal arts and pure sciences and closely linked with the Church. The historic development of equality as a central concept to universities is worth exploring here (further examined later in 3.4) Early on, traditional universities developed in a collegiate style which saw an equalling of opportunity able to attract students from middle and lower classes who wished to live and study together in small communities (Morrow, 2003). They came from all ranks of feudal society, some students poor enough to qualify for “alms” (Minogue, 1973:4) united in their (or their parents’) vision of attaining a broad education and, travelling to universities from some distance, forming what became, in essence, an international, equal society. One of the first statistical records of attendance available is again that of Oxford University from 1380 – 1500 where it is noted that 63.2% of the total 937 students came from rural areas, most the sons of “smallholders”. In contrast, only 6 students were of noble birth and 3 from urban aristocracy (Lytle, 1975: 83). In this respect it could be said that the original medieval universities were formed around a principle of wider access, focused firmly on the vision of education for those willing and capable, or at least, as Minogue notes, developed attitudes, standards and conventions which were resistant to parochialism (Minogue, 1973:19)

This age was a fascinating and complex time, with Royal Court hand-in-hand with Church influences. It was an age, war-driven, with information revolutions of their day. It is important not to over-simplify or claim too much from the early university. However it did play a role in developing the elite education market.

Employability was an early feature of these institutions; very few became career-scholars but rather saw attendance at the institution as an accreditation of being “educated”, in turn viewed as an asset in their attempt to make their way in the world thereafter. This process of accepting what was, in effect, a reference from an institution depended upon society, employers etc. respecting the authority and scholarly superiority of the university community. The Church held the core, most students being trained to work within the clergy profession, although some used

their knowledge of theology to progress a career in the civil service. The core strength of these first Higher Education Institutions was augmented and reinforced by the networking they gleaned from their business of educating what were to become the top strata of society, the clergymen and judges who would go on to hold the power in the country and who would remember their past masters (Prest, 1993). By the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the sector entered a period where expansion and development of the university concept effectively ceased for almost three hundred years.

During this phase, Scotland, hosting twice as many Ancients as England, retained a strong university core, but the development had extreme peculiarities, given the geographical context. Historically Scotland has placed education as a top priority in its political agenda. As far back as 1496, an Education Act passed by an independent Scottish Parliament under King James IV made schooling compulsory for the sons of nobles and freeholders (Holmes, 2000). By the 17<sup>th</sup> Century every parish in Scotland had a school and by the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century boys and girls were being schooled (Withrington, 2000). In terms of funding, once again, Scotland led the way with the four Ancients receiving annual grants from the State as early as 1600. In 1832 these were transferred to a parliamentary vote and, from that point on, the amount of funds so allocated was reviewed from time to time, allowing a mechanism for manipulation and exacting of conditions from the universities to be created (Shinn, 1986:13). It can therefore be read that two principles are emphasised with these policies: firstly, Scotland traditionally placed a great deal of importance on the power of education, and, secondly, some intervention by the State controlling matters of education was already accepted.

Operating within their own definitions, their own boundaries, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ancients had become respected centres of excellence, sharing similar ceremonial features (Becher, 1987; Brock and Curthoys, 1998; Harley *et al*, 2004). Their creation of a social network of intellectuals earned the reputation of socially

elite organisations (Scott, 1995:5). However, it bears repetition that the admission of students to HE in the first place was still, in principle, equal opportunity based.

With the dawning of the Industrial Revolution, society required alternative resourcing and the knowledge transfer could not be accomplished with the Ancients and a classical education alone. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, “Red Brick”<sup>14</sup> universities were created to meet this need, while, in Scotland, Polytechnic Colleges developed to respond. The Ancients retained their distinct position based on their historical stance right up to contemporary times where, even today, not only do they display these influences, it is claimed that they also carry their ancient customs and traditions as a central part of their belief system (Lockwood & Davies, 1985).

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the pressure to expand increased further and this marked the period of greatest change in the history of British universities. Demand for knowledge, heightened throughout society by employers, expected a certificated workforce. Meanwhile the development of research within industry required a strong base in universities. Society needed not only professional engineers, teachers, doctors and lawyers already supplied by Ancients and Red Brick Universities, it also demanded educationally qualified and certified nurses, agricultural experts, pharmacists, managers, brewers, physiotherapists, and it needed critical research in these fields.

The Robbins Report (1963) was to trigger an immense change in HE in the UK, recommending access to universities by all sectors of the community, increasing numbers of students and institutions and the creation of new universities, polytechnic colleges and the Open University. The second stage of university expansion in Scotland arrived with “Plate Glass”<sup>15</sup> universities by 1960. This new phase could have been an opportunity for Ancients to acquire what Trow (1991:18) calls a “buffer”. If the Plate Glass institutions had been set up as a separate section

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<sup>14</sup> The title “Red Brick” is rooted in the exterior façade of the Victoria Building tower in Liverpool, built from individual red pressed bricks patterned in rich terracotta panels.

<sup>15</sup> “Plate Glass” or “Glass Plate” is used in reference to the architecture, usually consisting of concrete, steel and glass.

of the HE sector they could have served the commercial purpose of universities well, designed as part of the remedy for the government's necessity to seek control and influence and the Ancients could have preserved autonomy. However the opportunity for such a clarification of purpose was missed. The government held firm to the idea of one standard, a "Gold Standard"; all universities should enjoy the same equality of esteem and academic standards in spite of pursuing different missions, with limited success (Tight, 2006). The standard, an outcome of the format of the expansion, has been a source of great debate since.

In 1987 a Governmental White Paper was published: "Higher Education – Meeting the Challenge" (referring to wider participation in HE). The crucial recommendation in this was the encouragement of Polytechnic Colleges' release from local authority control. Some of them took the opportunity to develop towards future attainment of university-chartered status. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 sealed the direction.

Politically, in Scotland, the picture complicated further. On 11<sup>th</sup> September 1997 a referendum saw more than 70% vote in favour of establishing a Scottish Parliament, enacted with the Scotland Act (1998), the first since 1707 (Himsworth & Munro, 2000). This development facilitated devolved powers, in particular Education, and for universities this created a complex environment at the turn of the new century. The introduction of funding control in a local base at Edinburgh to which all were accountable, while attracting students from a world wide market, competing on a global basis and adhering to British law, added an unpredictable element to the impact on Scottish universities.

It is easy to overlook or underestimate the multitude of stakeholders who influence the underlying philosophies of a Scottish Ancient. Central funding dependency has recently turned to the private stakeholders. Each £100 of public funding allocated to universities in 1981 was reduced to £60 in real terms by 2001 (Universities-Scotland, 2002a). As a result, compensation for the funding gap has been sought

from industry, research councils, alumni, private benefactors, (Universities-Scotland, 2002a), not to mention students, parents, and staff. All who contribute can legitimately claim to own a stake in the institution. Accountability of an Ancient to those stakeholders is a price that is due.

The new millennium has hailed an uncertain and complex future for a large HE industry. Four small universities from the Middle Ages to 1960 had, by 2000, become 14 universities with approximately 180,000 Higher Education students in Scotland (Universities-Scotland, 2005). However, the historical background offers some insight into why the Ancients are still underpinned by four main philosophies; providing the best of educational attainment (standards), offered to all those willing, no matter what their social or financial background (equality of opportunity), focusing on choice of subject with no limit (academic freedom), and encouraging an ethic of lifelong learning.

Taking these individually, within the UK, at the philosophical core of university education is the concept of a target for students - a degree which, while subject to its various classifications, is of a level standard. A degree from Cambridge is, theoretically, rated on the same level as one from St. Andrews, Manchester, Paisley, etc. This core standard deserves some examination.

### **3.3 Academic Standards**

Wagner (1995:23) has claimed that academic elitism is fundamental to the survival of universities today. Unlike the delivery of higher education in the United States where a variety of overall standards of degree qualification are recognised, in the UK, and indeed in Scotland, the university degree is described by Eustace (1991:32) as:

*“...the gold standard in British higher education [which] must today be described as a national intention and as State policy”.*

In comparison with the North American system, Trow (1987: 20) ponders on the defensive reaction to expansion in the UK:

*“There appears to be an assumption that academic work at the more modest standard offered to a broader student population must threaten the existing centres of excellence, as if Princeton were threatened by the standards of the state colleges or community colleges of New Jersey”.*

As HE expanded, protecting the value of a degree and maintaining “*intellectual rigour*” (Wagner, 1995) became critical; the dilution of standards caused anxiety for many within the academic sector. Consequences of the HE sectors’ expansion have included teaching larger classes with fewer resources, a route that necessarily impacts on a student’s educational experience. Business and Industry have talked about the “Quality of products and services” for many years, but this is now a term used increasingly within the university context, with some discomfort.

Briggs (2003:266) refers to quality within two frameworks:

- Quality Enhancement (QE) striving to improve quality of format on the inside of educational establishments, usually through improved learning and teaching.
- Quality Assurance (QA) which assures quality by requiring conformity to externally imposed standards

The latter’s reference to externally imposed standards provided a challenge for universities, especially where there is no external professional accreditation for the course (for example, Accounting). By 1997, Williams and Fry (1994:8) noted that ten years of expansion in student numbers necessitated ten years of focus on the qualitative consequences. The foundation of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), established partly as a response to qualitative concerns, had two foci:

- Academic standards – a way of establishing the level of achievement, standard across the United Kingdom, that a student had to reach before being awarded a degree.

- Academic quality – a way of establishing the better practice modes of learning providing opportunities to help students achieve that degree. (QAA, 1997)

However, the UK policy has created a dilemma; the single gold standard has been upheld and currently requires institutional review and monitoring through the QAA. Yet there is no national curriculum in universities; thus a measurement base is not established. Each institution providing a programme of study is expected to shape its own content (Universities-Scotland, 2005). Maintaining rigorous quality standards, which are comparable between an Ancient and a Post-1992 university, has become a major challenge in the current changing environment that managers in universities have to face.

Moodie (1991:9) describes the preoccupation with quality as a particularly British phenomenon. He confirms the view that one predominant type of HE is on offer, and in an expensive format (the traditional university). In the late 1980s a cry for a review of the single standard gained force maintaining that one high standard is in obvious clash with the equalling of opportunity to a diverse application (Moodie, 1991; Trow, 1987; Ball and Eggins, 1989; Eustace, 1991).

### **3.4 Equality of Opportunity**

There is no clear-cut supply/demand explanation for the disproportionate expansion of universities and of numbers of students within them since the 1960s. Expansion could be partly explained as a response to the recommendations of the 1963 Robbins Report for widening access to HE. However, it is debatable whether it was the government report, equal opportunity attitudes being adopted by society itself, prior to that, or a combination of the two was the actual driver of the change.

In principal, for over 500 years, elitism of educational achievement was congruent with an attitude of open admission to those of appropriate intellectual potential.

However, this is a simplistic equation when one considers opportunity to learning, family support and financial benefits as three examples of unequal factors. Nevertheless, even taken at face value, while recognising the irony, I would claim that the inequality in HE seemed to intensify shortly after Governmental equal opportunity agendas were introduced.

Scott (1995:71) describes post-war society in the UK, although aiming at an equal standard for education, as ripe for an elite system to develop. The Allies having won the war, Britain established a feel-good culture with emphasis on materialism and newfound optimism. The growing welfare state called for equal opportunities policies, but, the contextual environment at that point has to be remembered for these policies were relevant within a socially stable society featuring economic structures designed on the Keynesian principles of full employment and planned growth.

In response to Robbins, successive governments identified groups of potential students under-represented in HE. Defined funding proxies of particular marginal students were created using national criteria. These included students defined as Mature (prior to 2006 aged over 21 years at entry), Part-time, Ethnic Minority or Disabled and outlined an institution's target percentage of students who attended a state school, and who had to be from social classes IIIIM – V<sup>16</sup> or were from a low participation neighbourhood<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Registrar General's Social Classes, renamed in 1990, Social Class based on Parental Occupation. The categorisation has been in place since 1913 and splits UK society into 5 groups from I – Professional, II – Managerial and Technical, III skilled, M- manual, N- non manual, IV Partly skilled and V – Unskilled.

<sup>17</sup> The use of postcodes as an indicator of “low participation neighbourhoods” has been at the centre of fierce debate in Scotland, especially given the large rural areas included. The postcode can cover a wide area within which there will be both “deprived” and “wealthy” areas. Although more common in Scotland, this factor has also been identified in England, for example in a 1998 study of Brighton University students where, of 176 carrying the category of low participation neighbourhood, 48% had been classed as wealthy enough to pay the full fee status (Watson, 2002). In Scotland there has now been calls to abandon the Postcode assessment along with identification of students in terms of social class in reference to parental occupation.

The diversity of student profile was, however, not achieved in accordance with the government ideology of capturing the latent talent in these groups. To promote this stage of the wider access agenda, government targeting of background profile was enacted with provision of incentives and/or penalties to universities to create targeted programmes of engagement. This forced even traditional institutions to address the meaning of diversity, changing the focus from students making the, not inconsiderable, effort to join the institution (historically following their scholar around) to the institution having to go out to the student, encouraging and facilitating their entry.

Legislation followed, mirroring Whitehall's strategy in England, and interpreted for local application by the Scottish Executive and the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). This marked the first national review into Higher Education since Robbins, reiterated its predecessor's vision widening access to HE:

*“There should be maximum participation in initial higher education by young and mature students and in lifetime learning by adults, having regard to the needs of individual, the nation and the future labour market”. (Dearing, 1997:3)*

Secondary school teachers took up the cry, removing the perception barriers to students in the upper half of classes and following the political line that HE was within their grasp. Large employers started raising awareness of equal opportunity within HE. Whether appropriately or not, the public began to question whether a system of higher education based on elitism, which tended to have repercussions influenced by financial or class based values, was now acceptable or relevant for the diverse, technological United Kingdom (Eustace, 1991; 39). Female staff and students were particularly conscious that social structural analysis indicated universities were run by men and in ways that advantaged male students (Roberts and Woodward, 1981). Gallacher (2006: 349) describes equal opportunity implementation by the Conservatives in the 80s, its development through the 90s, to its emergence as a central focus for the New Labour government from 1997.

Legislation supported the public cry for an equal HE system and established public watchdogs in the form of government commissions monitoring the change and adherence to incoming policy.

Given the increase in stakeholder accountability, by the turn of the century, universities UK-wide undertook pledges, as each began to review and amend their recruitment and selection procedures<sup>18</sup>. The rhetoric flowed through to promotional literature as each university committed itself to the equal opportunity concept on paper.

However, the success of these initiatives has been doubted. Scott (1995), for one, noted that the expansion assisted in widening the gap between rich and poor in terms of HE participation since the 1970s (Blanden and Machin, 2004). There is copious statistical evidence that the government initiatives have not succeeded in Ancients.<sup>19</sup> The 1980s was a critical time for inequality to intensify, triggering a fundamental shift in the class structure of Ancient institutions. Halsey (1992) notes development of a pattern being followed in prestigious universities of actually narrowing their recruitment to the higher middle and upper classes of society and still focusing on the liberal arts and pure sciences. In doing so they left the more practical skill attainment to the lower classes and the new Higher Education Institutions which were being created. Rather than a conscious, strategic developmental move by the Ancients, it would seem more likely that the elitism

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<sup>18</sup> In 2001, for example, every Higher Education Institution in Scotland signed up to a 7 point commitment to improving social inclusion in higher education (covering areas such as fair admission, valuing all achievement and flexible learning).

<sup>19</sup> For example: In terms of attracting working class students, Gilchrist *et al* (2003) reported that students placed within socio-economic groups III<sub>m</sub>, IV, and V (skilled manual, semi-skilled and unskilled), although specifically targeted for social inclusion to HE, still remained seriously under-represented in 2003 in the UK, with less than 24% participating in HE, although 40% of young people in the population come from these family backgrounds.

developed as a result of their concentration on pure academic focus and avoiding being pushed into attributing practical applicability of their knowledge in most disciplines. Certainly, this would follow the traditional culture of higher status being ascribed to those choosing it as an *alternative* to physical labour in the middle ages. Therefore, the pattern was intensified further in the 1990s despite Scottish Executive's promotion of HE as "A Great Equaliser".

The government stance has, however, remained resolute. The contemporary claim for HE remains as:

*"the single most important factor in deciding whether a person is going to suffer poverty" Universities-Scotland (2005:2)*

Part of the university integrity has become increasingly highlighted as the desire to change the way that people think, to develop enquiring minds which continue to seek answers. This trait would not be limited by age to those between 18 and 22 years.

### **3.5 A Mission of "Lifelong Learning"**

The Scottish Executive, holding the view that more learning of different and various types throughout the lifespan will lead to a better and stronger society overall, has formed a platform for a vision of Scotland as a "Knowledge Society":

*"We have to build our economy on knowledge because we cannot compete on low wages" (Universities-Scotland, 2002a:1).*

The motivations for lifelong learning are multiple: retraining is seen as essential as people live longer and require a second career half way through life (Universities-Scotland, 2002a) while the educational needs of students of all ages have diversified with the strong economic forces shaping a worldwide market (Hassan *et al*, 1996). The speed of technological development can see individuals and societies who do not engage in the lifelong learning agenda being left behind. On one hand, the

technological development can be accused of suddenly increasing the interest of lifelong learners but Trow (2000) rejects this emphasising that Information Technology (IT) has simply accelerated the process, not created it. IT changes the format of teaching and opens up new possibilities to meet the demand from individuals, which will allow the combination of education with a variety of life formats (for example, long-distance relations). It offers societies the opportunity for citizens to be informed in a timely manner and reviewing the development of learning tools. It can also challenge the active elderly mind.

The link to education “unlocking poverty” is described as the main motivating force to a vision of lifelong learning extending well beyond Scotland or the UK. In fact, it was quoted as core to an important text, the classic report of the Third International Conference on Adult Education in Tokyo by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1972). The report initiated worldwide acclaim that this formula of “lifelong learning” was worthy of adoption for the betterment of societies and sat well with university philosophies moving the emphasis away from a direct link to vocational training. Many governments have used its recommendations as targets in the thirty years since.

Within the UK, the necessity of a lower boundary within universities is one not determined by age but by previous (primary and secondary) qualifications. Although most students are approximately 18 years old at the commencement of their degree study, there are cases of students having completed their previous education earlier and therefore most institutions have had experience of one or two 14, 15 and 16 year olds. In Scotland, it is still possible for 17 year olds to enter degree study. However, the upper boundary is one which the UK government has worked hard to remove. In selling the concept of lifelong learning, the encouragement of Mature students to see university as relevant to them has become an important part of the Scottish Executive agenda, with the reminder that education should be seen as a “from cradle to grave” experience.

The inclusion of all ages in the search for truth, widening perspectives, expanding knowledge of the universe, is in the spirit of reinforcing the individual and societal beneficial role of universities. However, while the philosophy of lifelong learning is congruent with that of universities, the government interpretation of the term “lifelong learning” is not limited or even focused on HE, far less on university (Scottish Executive, 2003). The term is now being recognised as an umbrella term for all aspects of formal and informal education and training (Candy, 2000). While moral, economic and health arguments are offered encouraging mature people to learn new skills and keep their minds active (Bunyan and Jordan, 2005) this could be undertaken at night classes or through the development of ideas in community learning groups. University is quite another matter, given the huge commitment in time and earnings required from the individual, and the infrastructure required from the university.

### **3.6 Academic Freedom/Accountability.**

The principle of “*Lehrfreiheit*”, or “Academic Freedom”, originating in German universities, accords universities the privilege of teaching and researching in whatever way they wish allowing for any issue of human significance to be intellectually considered without limitation or restriction (Shoben, 1971). The principle has been studied at length by Metzger (1955:112) who emphasised the necessity of protecting it as a core value within research universities, espousing the specialisation and development of new ideas as crucial and quite distinct from the development of new skills.

Fundamentally the concept of Academic Freedom cannot be separated from its counterpart of Accountability. In the contemporary Ancient academic community, nothing will trigger an outcry of denial more than the claim that they should tailor their academic enquiry in line with society’s demands. In the original communities of intellectual stimulation and the “think tanks” of the medieval age, Ancients’ primary contribution to society was focused on challenging society’s ideas (still seen as a critical purpose by some of our institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century).

However, the funding accountability in the early days was quite different from our publicly funded institutions of today. It can be argued that the roots of the traditional cultural beliefs were laid down in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Century universities in terms of attitude towards monetary rewards and resources. Laurie (1891: 161) aptly sums up the system of beliefs in the original institutions:

*“What rendered the University of Paris especially powerful, nay positively formidable, was its poverty. The university did not possess so much as a building of its own, but commonly was obliged to hold its meetings in the cloisters of friendly monastic orders. Its existence thus assumed a purely spiritual (intellectual) character, and was rendered permanently independent of the temporal authority” (in Lunden 1932: 97)*

This philosophy, deeply detached from societal influence and application, defines money as being simply a tool, to provide a means to an end, without the power to influence the process or the nature of the outcome.

It is not difficult to see the latent tensions in a philosophy which cannot survive the modern age without challenge. In fact, as far back as the mid 17<sup>th</sup> Century this remote university position of “monkish erudition” (Minogue, 1973: 26) came under attack as calls emerged for universities to contribute to national wealth and power. A common criticism of universities, in varying degrees historically, is that theory must be applied to the needs of current society in order to be of value:

*“If the lives of most people take place within the warm circles of practice, the academic world is to be found flying off at a tangent – a situation it shares with art and lunacy” (Minogue, 1973: 221)*

The principle of Academic Freedom and of Accountability is inextricably linked in a triangular relationship to the concept of Purpose. In 1851 the influential philosopher and theologian John Henry Newman developed the classic text on traditional university purpose, “The Idea of a University” (published 1860 and examined comprehensively in the next chapter). Newman’s ideology rested fundamentally on the virtue of Academic Freedom and the core purpose of a

university being to provide a liberal learning opportunity rather than a professional or vocational training. Refutations of Newman's stance, not difficult to find in his own day, are still maintained in the contemporary literature (Turner, 1996).

Throughout exploration of the literature, discussed in this chapter, I welcomed this vision of people within universities on unfettered, intellectual adventures together. However, the necessity for this vision to be funded has introduced the inevitable pragmatism. Newman's vision seems restrictive and shallow when the luxury of academic freedom depends upon personal financing thus clearly clashing with the principle of equality of access to education. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the principle of academic freedom is unlikely to be applied in a standard fashion throughout an HE sector currently pressurised by contesting stakeholders, with individual institutions carrying accountability burdens to varying extents. Funding considerations can sharpen the focus of purpose somewhat. Freedom is a luxury that some simply cannot afford.

Thatcher's arrival to the Westminster Government in 1979 intensified the political control, with an implicit expectation of institutional accountability in return. The interdependency between Ancients and the UK State grew slowly, and, almost imperceptibly. As the sector expanded in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the measure of independence allowable to a publicly funded institution came into question. The high degree of internal autonomy remained, however, a fundamental cornerstone of Ancients culture and their lack of experience in dealing with the concept of accountability has been documented (Becher, 2001; Moodie, 1991; Trow, 1991). The implication has been that the pressure exerted by Governments is felt more acutely, and consequently resented more, in the Ancient environment, in spite of the fact that some interference by the State had been experienced in 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Scottish HE (see section 3.2).

The timing of the funding initiatives coincided with the introduction of the centrally funded Plate Glass institutions in the 1960s. Initially the academic communities welcomed the funding as a method of universities receiving what they saw as a fair income, direct rather than *via* students. There could be many reasons for this. Initially it could have been interpreted by institutional managers and governors that Government funding would not tie institutions to the requirements of business and industry, allowing them to retain their academic freedom of curriculum. The funding mechanism distanced them from the culture of fee-paying customers. The visionary scholar would demand an essential separation of finances and knowledge (Lunden, 1932) and a refusal which could sit uncomfortably with the visionary scholar who would demand an essential separation between finances and knowledge and a distancing of reducing their vision to one of product marketing. With hindsight it might be argued that it should have been obvious that they were unlikely to get something for nothing. Cobban (1975:119) comments on the challenge to institutional independence:

*“They [the universities] must long since have realised that academic freedom, in any purist sense, was a chimera and that society would not tolerate or financially support academic groupings without exacting some kind of quantitative return”*

Wagner (1995:67) describes the change in government intervention using the following analogy of popping a cheque through a letter box and then:

*“...they wanted to knock on the door, open the door, peek inside, walk inside, observe what they saw, ask questions, expect answers, suggest changes and then change their size of the cheque if they don't get them”*

Conditions started to creep in. As universities learned to dance to the tune of the piper, being paid (Shinn, 1986), in this case to upgrade their labs, provide funds to students to attend, build their estates and fund their research, the recommendations of the Robbins Report (1963) began to bite and government conditions were applied. The Government “encouraged” universities to widen their recruitment; numbers of students had not only to be increased, but, as a government agenda of social inclusion became important, the profile of these students would also need

adjustment. Universities were viewed increasingly as central to the goal of universal social betterment. To enforce this further they produced legislation ensuring that previous criteria barring entry to higher education, such as gender, financial strength or disability, became initially irrelevant, and eventually, illegal. Internal policy came to be externally dictated (Shattock, 2006).

Up to this point reference has been made to “the State” and to “the Government” as if this were an entity, a united body. In practice, this has been far from the case. As Scott (1995) reminds us, Universities today have to deal with sub-systems of Government; ministries and government agencies with multiple missions and distinct agendas are creating pluralism in university-Government liaison which often has to find a route through on a business contractual basis.

Very recently, the funding pendulum has started to swing back. Other stakeholders are entering the frame and the balance between public and private funding of HE shows considerably less governmental input than 20 years ago (Universities-Scotland, 2002a) with claims that this will decrease further in future (Adnett, 2006). Palfreyman (2004:4) describes the muddling through of the HE sector by contributing less to each student in the UK as it faces:

*“The steady retreat of the taxpayer in funding students and HEIs”*

The accountability has not decreased, however; quite the contrary. Accountability is now complicated with alternative stakeholders to the Government, including, in some case, general society, demanding their justifications for spending. Staff, students; expectations are raised all around.

### **3.7 Summary**

Within UK universities sits a small core of deeply committed, ideologically traditional institutions in Scotland. They are 4 of the original 7 Ancients and within

them the changes experienced throughout the rest of the UK have been mirrored. Their historical background, rooted in medieval times, has influenced their current format and culture.

Although the prestige of a university rests on a number of factors, institutional age, taken as symbolic of tradition, endurance and robustness, is a major factor. Philosophies developed early on in Ancients have included maintenance of intellectually rigorous standards, the equal access by anyone with intellectual standard on entry, developing a lifestyle of intellectual pursuit and a freedom to choose the direction of the intellectual enquiry which supersedes financial conditions.

Contemporary Ancients are, however, facing a very different set of challenges from their predecessors, albeit that their traditional, historical background has to operate with an ancient operational influence and under the terms of the traditional culture and belief system. In these institutions these influences result in an interesting blend of past and present, creating a social construction of a “student” or a “graduate” which differs from those emerging from modern or Post-1992 universities.

It is my contention that, although evolving for over 600 years, the changes in the past 40 years have targeted the university and particularly the Ancient institutional culture which some claim (Trow, 1987), now places HE in the UK in a position of “crisis”. The “Gold Standard” of HE (Eustace, 1991) is perhaps an outmoded model unable to be operated without flexibility being increasingly applied, in turn resulting in doubts over credibility and validity of degree (a matter discussed at length in Chapter 6). The tensions increase for institutions pursuing standards dictated by government targets combining research excellence and widening participation simultaneously, rather than giving them the ability to follow their freestanding missions (Tight, 2006).

The move towards wider access of students to these institutions has followed a societal shift and government agendas in the direction of an equalising of opportunity. The establishment of Plate Glass and Post-1992 universities as a component part of post World War II expansion has been, I would argue, one catalyst behind the development of a particularly elitist culture in the Ancients in their defensive striving to retain their uniqueness. Ironically, I believe the introduction of equal opportunity political agendas may have increased the inequality between Ancients and other formats of university and, in an era where comprehensive secondary education strives to even the playing field, has offered a class structure system opportunity at tertiary level.

All Higher Education Institutions have started to understand their public body status but there is discomfort with the recent acquisition of a variety of stakeholders to whom they are now accountable. These include society, government, local and national economies and industry, funding and research councils staff, students (with a “customer” mentality) and their parents who pay, each having a clear expectation of what they hope to reap in return for their financial contributions.

Viewing HE as a scholastic venture, seeking to open minds and offering a rounded education, its use for teaching Mature students has been encouraged through a developing philosophy of lifelong learning. However, this may be more congruent with Newman’s vision (1860) rather than the assumption of a more affluent lifestyle based on the value of a degree in monetary gains. One could argue that it is an assumption allowed, indeed encouraged, by the Government to develop in the minds of potential students (or customers of the service), is reinforced in news items or speeches at political conferences, and promises made by specific political parties.

The crisis of the Ancient, Scottish university, in a nutshell, sees its vision undergoing transition amidst a level of turmoil (Dill, 1992; Eustace, 1994; Dearlove, 2002). It has to widen access and expand disproportionately while

maintaining standards, identifying stakeholders, regulating its duty to society and the applicability of its teaching. Alongside, it is important not to understate the influence of tradition, internally expressed by the urge to construct a student from an Ancient in a particular traditional format which discourages students from a non-traditional background.

I would contend that the critical avenue for being able to harmonise these opposing tensions lies at the core of universities' culture in the concept of purpose, focusing targets and expectations of outcome delivery. This concept is examined in the next chapter, both from the perspective of the institution and from that of the Mature students within this study.

This completes Part I, the contextual background of my personal motivation, the theoretical landscape offering perspectives of organisational analysis and the specific context of the universities providing the locus for this study. Part II takes the focus down to the literature surrounding the students themselves, in particular those studying at a Mature age, starting with the period of time *before* their full interaction with the Ancient and, crucially, centring on their understanding of university purpose.

## PART II – THE LITERATURE

### Chapter 4

#### Purpose versus Expectations

##### *Before the Interaction*

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The next three chapters outline the literature surrounding each of three points of the interaction between Mature student and university<sup>20</sup>. Within the wider participation agenda, the literature, which focuses on age as a defining category of diversity, is well developed historically. However, of those studies investigating Mature student education, the literature landscape reveals that few have been undertaken in the Scottish HE sector and even fewer taken from a holistic perspective, incorporating life outside of the academic role. This could be seen as surprising considering the focused promotion in the 1990s of the lifelong learning by the, then, Scottish Executive. It is, however, worth mentioning some notable exceptions in universities (Osborne *et al*, 1997; Hall and Powney, 1998; Tett, 2004) and some other studies which particularly concentrated on health with Medical, Nursing and Occupational Health students (Fleming and McKee, 2005; Cuthbertson *et al*, 2004). Furthermore, in recognition of Mature students' role as funding assets, the hub of recent studies has turned to retention issues (Bolam and Dodgson, 2003). It is also important to highlight that this does not include a much larger area of literature which, although including maturity, chooses to focus on other definitions of non-traditional students, for example, “working class” (Bamber & Tett, 1999). Although these may be referred to, I will concentrate on those which take age as the defining criteria.

The focus of the Mature student literature search conducted for the purposes of this study was restricted to those UK wide studies dated from 2000 until 2007 in order to offer a manageable set of studies (29) and those identified are outlined in

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<sup>20</sup> These are outlined in Chapter 1, page 31

Appendix 4. This set, although comprehensive in terms of spanning the spectrum of the issues highlighted most commonly in Mature student studies, is not absolute. Other studies preceding the time frame have been screened and some earlier studies (or important ones from outside the UK) have occasionally been included in comments where a sense of context is seen as important or where studies are identified as groundbreaking.

Mindful of the Social Constructionist Framework, the theoretical approach to be used in the empirical section of this study, the literature search was undertaken with the basic premise of Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) and Hesketh (1999) in mind, that the social and cultural origins of students influence their interpretations of their experiences.

This chapter begins my investigation by examining the purpose of universities and their product on one side of the equation compared with student expectations on the other. I would suggest that the success and/or failure of the marriage of the two, dictates, to a major extent, the nature and quality of the student experience.

## **4.2 The University Purpose Debate**

If purpose is examined within the historical context, we can see that it has been shaped through the years by government demands, societal need and internal culture for centuries. Arguably the greatest challenge has come in the questioning of the value of a course of study at university level when the government purpose for the sector, the staff aims and the student expectations are not necessarily congruent.

A literature search on the subject revealed four broad bases of thought: teaching, research, societal betterment and knowledge transfer, with the prioritisation of these being highly significant. Each Scottish institution will account to a number of stakeholders, each of these influencing the direction of that institution's purpose. These stakeholders, and the resulting focus of purpose, may well change from year

to year. Specialisation may seem a tempting route to take, but some warn that the interdependency of these requires consideration (Jaspers, 1960). Institutions strive to maintain their individuality, each establishment triggered by different drivers, catering for different populations, teaching different academic curricula.

Starting with the first two purposes highlighted, arguably the most obvious, Universities-Scotland (2005) states:

*“Since they were established, universities have had two main “missions” – to teach students and to create new knowledge”*

#### 4.2.1 Teaching and Research

Historical or contemporary, the teaching role of universities is one of those placed at their critical core. However, when considering the appropriate selection of students to teach, the level of intellectual strength necessary for university engagement is debateable, echoing the observation of the Greek scholar, Rhodes, that, out of 100 students, 99 did not understand his teaching while the 100<sup>th</sup> did not need him (quoted in Jaspers, 1960:73). I would suggest that what differentiates universities is the level of depth of theoretical learning; the development of critical awareness, gaining insight to a depth and width of theoretical understanding not necessarily appropriate for applicability which fits with university rather than other forms of tertiary education. If this is the case, then the selection of candidates for university programmes would have to include the capacity to think critically.

The key task for a state-funded HE sector is identifying the correct level at which to pitch the university teaching and degree. The appropriate level has to maximise the intellectual potential of students who come already able to perform academically at a high level and with some initiative already, but who require academic guidance and encouragement to expand their knowledge base. If levelled at the lowest common denominator, teachers become anxious that those intellectually able for

academic challenge remain un-stretched.<sup>21</sup> Schuller (1995) highlighted the dilemma faced by institutions committing effort directly to their students and yet balancing that with commitment to the generation of scholarship and knowledge.

This leads on to the second but, some may argue, stronger core purpose of some universities (especially Ancients) - research. For some academics, teaching is a necessary burden which allows them the finances and the resources (laboratories, libraries, etc.) to escape to their research wherever possible (Ylijoki, 2000). Research portfolios are the key criteria for promotion and recognition within academics' discipline-based, peer group. It follows therefore that one of the greatest sources of tension is the resultant requirement of academics to attain high levels of research performance when an increasing proportion of their time is occupied by student-related work (Becher, 1989; Harley, 2004; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2000). Henkel (2000: 139) describes a role of teaching, which no longer involves standing up in the afternoon and simply describing that which you have been researching in the morning:

*“staff must not only generate new courses; they must cost them, determine and stimulate markets for them, evolve new ways of delivering them and ensure they can stand up to hard external scrutiny.”*

Ancients, in particular, are dependent on the funding resources allocated by the Funding Councils based on the outcome of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). As in any competitive process, the RAE has been the source of great tension and political struggle within universities, to the point where it is now credited with having made distributing funding selectively more difficult, ironically an initial objective of the process (Tapper and Salter, 2004). For the competing institutions, there is a clear difference between being labelled “research-led” and “research-

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<sup>21</sup> This, in 2007, has become a regular cry of frustration from teachers in the primary and secondary school sectors. However in these, teaching is compulsory, inclusive and addresses all in the class according to mixed ability. HE differs in that it is based on exclusive ability, originally voluntary and ultimately testing pending appraisal.

intensive”, with the latter commonly accepted as an optimum target, while the former implies a deliberate downgrading of the other university purposes. In Scotland academic departments rating less than a 4 in the exercise<sup>22</sup> have no research funding provided<sup>23</sup> and this can lead to a situation where the “research lead” starts to go down the route of separation of “teaching” from “research” universities (Neave, 2006). This system of measurement is scheduled to be replaced in 2008 with a metrics led system, with little or no emphasis on peer review. Interestingly, a consequence of this is envisaged to be even further administrative burdens on institutions, with pressures to evidence function in terms of, for example, research income, student numbers and citations.

Fierce debates are commonplace in Ancient universities about whether teaching or research should be given greater resourcing. However this separate comparison could carry intrinsic danger. The leading philosopher and existentialist, Karl Jaspers (1960) insisted that universities are founded on a critical interdependence of purposes and, as an example, maintained that teaching divorced from research would be robbed of its basic impetus. Whatever priority was highlighted, however, Jaspers confirmed that a side product of the experience was the betterment of people in some way, individually and collectively.

#### 4.2.2 Social Change

In 2005, Universities-Scotland identified a mission for the HE sector to use its universities as conduits for social change highlighting the link between education and social class, reverting back to the vision of education as “The Great Equaliser” as outlined in the Lifelong learning promotion in Chapter 3. Archer *et al* (2003) confirm assumptions that more graduates should result in a number of social and economic benefits at a national level for individuals (and under-represented groups). The Universities-Scotland publication, “A Space to Create” (2002c),

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<sup>22</sup> Maximum score is 5\*

<sup>23</sup> with the exception of those rated “rising 3a”

launched an acknowledgement by the sector itself that Higher Education Institutions should have a necessary balance between the business role and the role in developing a cultured, intellectual society.

It is important to separate two purposes here: making better people and making better societies. Both aims are riddled with challenges. The definition of “better” must be determined. No cause and effect link between a university education and a changed lifestyle has been made. Given that the expansion of universities is relatively recent, the effect of the increased access on social class mobility would require a longitudinal view and would be likely to cross over an organic definition of class boundaries. (The equating of a university degree with more wealth is an argument which will be critically examined throughout this thesis.)

However, if we follow this train of thought further, even if increased earnings or more lucrative job were to be a guaranteed result from a university degree, there is doubt over the influence of wealth over class status. Goldthorpe *et al*'s influential “Affluent Worker” study (1969) examined the effect that money had on car workers' class status and tried to identify attitude changes in comparison to those of the middle classes. The findings indicated that, despite the increase in finance, working class values were maintained due to the unfamiliarity of middle-class trappings which they could now afford (for example, bank savings accounts) but were uncomfortable with using. Methodological challenges to the Affluent Worker study have come forward (Saunders, 1990) with the suggestion that capitalism has opened up new opportunities for social mobility. In addition, the view of the class boundaries of society as closed and static is being increasingly challenged. This refutation of the fundamental class determination relates to any study of non-traditional students. It would seem that one product being perceived as sold by universities is a new determination of class based on intellectual assessment although this claim should recognise the possibility of distinct academic standards in specific areas of study at different universities as discussed in Chapter 3.

Without being explicit in the gains expected from a university education, some accuse governments of using educational establishments as part of a deliberate strategy to manage societal culture in terms of identity, control and power. The work of Michel Foucault (1980, 1982) is a core text in this area. Foucault describes cultures which are seen overtly to evolve and change while, in parallel, a hidden subtle system, the established institutions, e.g. universities, the NHS, etc., are used by governments to maintain the *status quo* through the use of traditional language and norms. The opposite also holds true, claims Foucault, in that society can be manipulated into introducing new ideas and accepting them as the norm, using institutions, for example, schools, churches, prisons, hospitals. The Foucauldian approach to analysis of the educational experience takes a broader perspective on what is taught, including the subtle rules of the institutional format within which the education is presented and in this he is joined by others of the “critical pedagogy” perspective (Giroux, 1989, 1997). However, the crediting of the institution as the centre of power is insulting to the concept of human freedom and clearly underestimates agency. Those in opposition to Foucault, for example, Chomsky (Wilkin, 1999) and Norris (2001) deny that we are in a powerless position, unable to act through autonomous thinking - the result of Foucault’s drastic view of institutional manipulation. Marshall (1995) cites Foucault’s response, insisting that institutions are used by governments to ensure their citizens are governed, and accountable (Hoskin and MacVe, 1986) but this is done by manipulating them into believing that they are free; the double bluff and not a little ironic. Nevertheless, Tett (2005) reminds us:

*“the personal and social damage inflicted by inequality, social exclusion and restricted opportunity is immense”*

My own view therefore, while holding firm to the *right* of an individual to question a governmental agenda, separates this from an individual’s *ability* with all the informed and educated subject knowledge required in these sorts of situations. Crucial to society is the establishment of a body of critical thinkers, with focus on remedial trials and advanced hypotheses, continuing to equip others with this

ability, and it is in this sphere that the work of universities is so important, ever questioning and providing a safeguard against government control.

Of particular interest in the debate is the autonomy of the institution. As has been shown in the last chapter, Scottish universities sit within a fast-changing political context with, as yet, untested accountability which is now, reluctantly, recognised. While this debate can question a philosophical stance, the influence of Foucauldian analysis suggests that complacency and acceptance of universities as evolving institutions in response to what the people want is naïve.

An additional concern, running throughout this debate, raises the question as to whether this “social engineering” or engineering change (Scott, 1998) is appropriate, or even possible, in *all* universities? Furthermore, is it applicable to the same standard timescale at each or does the specialising of certain institutions, in reality, prioritise their purpose?

#### 4.2.3 Knowledge Transfer

The fourth major purpose could follow as a directive if one takes Foucault’s view of government control over universities, control assumed as a consequence of its considerable financial subsidising of that sector. I am struck by the apparent acknowledgement in recent years of the value of the HE sector to the Government. Porter’s (1985) model describing the “Value Chain Framework” as a tool for organisations to develop “Competitive Advantage” offers a structure for the recognition of advantages to the Government supporting an HE sector with international acclaim, financial marketing benefits and knowledge credibility. Even with differences in their strategic approaches, the HE sector has developed from European roots, but adapted to individual application and is now hosting prestige. Accreditation from one of these institutions is unlikely to be of questionable credibility. In parallel, universities have been costing the government increasingly

large sums of money and it is not surprising that they are coming under governmental scrutiny looking for a return on their financial investment.

Currently a key political mission, outlined specifically by Universities-Scotland, the representative body for the Scottish HE sector, has identified “knowledge transfer” as crucial (Universities-Scotland, 2005). Extending the skills training element of a university’s purpose, Universities-Scotland claims that the practical application of key ideas and researched discoveries should be relevant and linked with both industry and the Scottish economy. Universities are encouraged to liaise closely with potential employers to provide graduates with the development opportunities to raise Scottish Competitiveness (Universities-Scotland, 2005). Not unique to Scotland, recognition is there for what Mills (2004: 218) calls:

*“the global discourses that define universities in terms of their contributions to national economic competitiveness”*

However, Universities have, as far back as the middle ages, devoted their thoughts to academic ideas which were not necessarily critical to immediate matters affecting current society:

*“They have, therefore, often been found infuriatingly unresponsive to what have seemed to many to be the obvious and overriding needs of mankind” (Minogue, 1973:26)*

Previous faculties created to serve the local economy, for example those in engineering centres of Red Brick universities, are now accepted as legitimate intellectual avenues. The creation of new disciplines, however, leads us into areas of apparent public confusion in a new society where awarding of degree status to courses traditionally attributed with skills status (e.g. golf management) conflict with opposing opinion that students should be attracted away from liberal arts courses and encouraged to take more degrees in directly vocational study (Edwards, 2006).

Throughout this debate, I would contend that vocationalism is not necessarily to be equated with employability. This is a theme which I shall pursue with the empirical data of this study.

#### 4.2.4 Newman

No discussion of university purpose can be considered without the backdrop of John Henry Newman's core text "The Idea of a University" (1860). The first part, containing nine discourses, argued essentially for two principles: firstly that universal knowledge must, necessarily, include religion, and secondly a university was required to deliver a liberal, not professional or vocational, education. He passionately defended the university purpose to be that of expanding intellectual outlook and referred to debates, held earlier that century in Oxford, which had concluded that university purpose was three-fold: critical intelligence, moral decency and to produce persons of knowledge. He denied that there was a remit or role for universities to concern themselves with whatever people did with that knowledge, once attained. The encouragement of direct economic application of university teaching and research in a vocational education format would have proved distasteful to Newman. His text ignited a debate, now of long standing, as historians, educationalists, politicians and business employers contemplate this concept of purpose of universities.

Newman was recognised as a core theoretical text at the centre of the "academic freedom" and "purpose" debates with key writers for over a century re-examining his discourses as the universities continued to develop, especially throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Ker, 1976; McGrath, 1951; Culler, 1955; Turner, 1996). McGrath (1951:509) encapsulates Newman's idea in a testimony to his achievement, admitting a lack of realism, but claiming his contribution as nonetheless vital for:

*“.....the noble idea which he had sketched in immortal prose, the idea of a university courageously treading every field of human knowledge, and valuing that knowledge not merely as the revelation of the wealth of the university, not merely as the revelation of the deepest thoughts and loftiest aspirations of the human mind, but most of all as the revelation of that which gives it all its value and meaning, the ultimate Truth and Good”.*

One of Newman’s most criticised claims (Pelikan, 1992) was that of a university’s purpose rightfully being concerned with looking inward and training good members of society rather than the institution recognising any duty to society itself. Newman’s defence of this would have been that if universities produced “good” citizens in accordance with his understanding of university purpose, this would be a valued and worthy service in itself, rather than having to utilise that “goodness” in a specified direction. The “goodness”, in Newman’s thinking, was defined in terms of mental refinement based on literary and philosophical training, allowing an individual thereafter to organise their thoughts, express their ideas in an articulated manner, and address challenges in life with principles of rationale. In his view this would be far superior to the narrow vocational training which lacked a breadth of liberal knowledge. However, within business’ global market and international education, it is a complex process to delineate boundaries to which “society” an institution owes that duty. The local context of duty as an employer, economic source, and landowner is the first layer of “society” to be considered before attention is turned to national and international duties.

#### 4.2.5 Specialist Institutions

Halsey suggests that Britain needs universities for the scholarly few, but higher education in its broadest sense, pluralistically funded, should be provided for everyone (Cuthbert, 1991: 341). The balance ratio between certain purposes may be unique to each institution and does raise the question as to whether specialist focus should be an option for current universities, taking us back to Halsey’s suggestion. Taking, for example, the purpose of societal betterment, geographical environment may critically influence the potential demographic profile of student it

could attract. The impracticality of attracting students from a low-income background to a university which is far away, necessitating high resettlement costs, can only be partly alleviated by bursaries. Non-traditional students are more likely to have a background of family responsibilities, including dependent children or disability. Their circumstances cannot be transferred by a simple move away from home and family support. Students accustomed to living in cities may experience culture shock of living at a rural HEI, and this too can cause problems.

In short, the practicality of socially engineering a fixed expectation of adjusted recruitment targets to all institutions, without making allowances for their particular physical barriers, is one which is naïve and idealistic. Justifying the institutional focus on one particular specialism could be attempted but obvious counter-arguments would follow the institutional accountability to a society funding and requiring rewards of their determination (back to Shinn's (1986) argument in the last chapter).

Jaspers (1960) noted the necessary interdependence of particular features of purpose or, in fact, to all elements of institutional characteristic sub-division. Knowledge transfer did not feature in Jaspers' view of purpose for universities. His was three-fold: teaching, research and societal betterment, and included emphasis that each was indissolubly linked to the other two: if one were separated the others would wither and die. The richness of diversity would be lost. In fact, Yorke and Thomas (2003) studied six English institutions which were performing better than their benchmark to identify indicators for excellence and concluded that their commitment to wider access and retention committed to diversity was vital to their success. Jaspers' observations are particularly relevant in relation to institutions promoting "blue sky" research as a feeder for institutions working with more practical subjects.

Students' successful experience would seem to be benefited if their expectations and motivations for engaging with university in the first place were to be matched by the product that the university is offering. This presumes that each university's purpose is easily identified by applicant students. It also presumes that it is met by clearly identifiable motivations of the individual student. Since widening the recruitment of students has taken on such importance to institutions in the past two decades, a considerable amount of literature exists documenting the potential student marketing strategies based on what the student wants from a university.

### **4.3 Individual Motivations**

Recent empirical studies (Archer, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2001; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Connor, 2001), with broadly similar findings, have tried to explore the reasons why some people choose to undertake university while others do not. Some have focused on the non-traditional perspectives of HE in general (Bamber & Tett, 2001) while others (Archer & Hutchings, 2000) have carried out comparative studies between participants and non-participants.

The Archer & Hutchings study is interesting, having been conducted on participant and non-participant focus groups in London of people aged 16 – 30, identifying a broad range of factors for consideration for engagement including cost, risk, and benefits espoused during application. The finding highlighted marketing of any service or product is at its most successful when it connects with the customer and can establish relevance to their life; it can offer them something they think they need. University is no exception. In a subsequent study Archer *et al* (2003) categorised engagement factors with HE into three areas: political pressure, financial rewards and improved self-image. These are worth exploring individually.

#### **4.3.1 Political Pressure**

The political pressure factor outlines propaganda influence - the "Everybody Needs A Degree" argument, the "default" after leaving school. The heavy pressure from

government agencies, teachers, Further Education (FE) College staff and parents is noted in studies (e.g. Connor, 2001) but a convincing argument is critical on how university would benefit the participant in the long run.

However, the level of relevance of university is necessarily varied by particular sub-sectors of society, with non-uniform benefits. Archer and Hutchings (2000) and Archer *et al* (2003) found that target groups (for example, young ethnic minority urban men) unable to visualise the experience remain dubious about the benefits. Mature students, in particular, are unlikely to receive or succumb to parental influence and may come from a traditional background of practical, skills-based employment. Meanwhile the middle and upper classes see a degree as a “must-have” accessory in their equipment for life:

*“In a Mass system not only has the middle class taken over higher education: higher education has also taken over the middle class. In the process graduate status has become an essential attribute of a middle class lifestyle, arguably a more important attribute than class origin or occupational category in a post-industrial age”. (Scott, 1995: 109)*

#### 4.3.2. Financial and Employment Rewards

The two strands of financial/lifestyle betterment on the one hand, and psychological (in terms of self-esteem and confidence) development on the other, is pervasive in the Mature student motivational literature.

The belief that a degree is equated with a “better” job (in turn critically associated with more financial rewards [Astin, 1991]) is fed to prospective students in the government literature (Live and Learn, 2002). This could, of course, be because they find it useful to have a “justifying mantra” ready to hand. Nevertheless Round (2005) noted that first generation students are more likely to name job prospects as their reason for attendance than second generation, taking their trigger for entry from the government information rather than from parents.

However, 15 years after the start of this political move towards wider access, literature is increasingly dubious that the investment is advisable, at least in financial and employment terms. The value of a university education in solely economic terms is worth questioning. Non-traditional students, in particular, are making a significantly expensive financial commitment on the promise from some evidence (Blundell, 1997) and government committees (e.g. Dearing, 1997) and accompanying propaganda that this will be financially rewarded (Adnett and Slack, 2007). Research (for example, Naylor *et al*, 2002; O’Leary & Sloane, 2005), and publicity in the press (Henry, 2007) has disputed these claims, suggesting that, in England and Wales at least, the supply of graduates into the workplace may now be outstripping market demand. These authors alleged a Scottish mirroring of this, with estimates of graduate life earnings averaging £140,000 improvement on non-graduate life earnings. This is a reduction on the previous estimate of £400,000 and dropped further still to £22,000 for Arts graduates (O’Leary & Sloane 2005). All of this has to be viewed within the context of young graduates; mature graduates have increased risk with less years of employability. Factors such as classification of degree, prior qualifications, previous schooling (including independent versus state), and family background are critical in successfully gaining financial return through employment (Naylor *et al*, 2002) while, with Mature students specifically, gender, ethnicity and class play a major role in the personal calculation of risk and opportunity (Reay, 2002b). Childcare costs for female students (Reay *et al* 2002a) and the reluctance of male “breadwinners” to give up secure, if low paid, employment when families need support (Marks *et al*, 2000), add to the complicated calculation necessary by Mature students. Increased emphasis has appeared in the literature for institutions to accept responsibility for equalising some of these barriers, change their image and environment, if they are to appeal to this, much wider, audience. However, this would seem to oppose the Ancients’ rejection of being viewed in terms of skills training, and relates back to the central purpose debate of Chapter 3.

Financial gain is one aspect of the employment market. However, some aim for a “different and better” job to the one they have prior to undertaking HE. “Changing direction” is a theme running through the literature on mature motivation as those disaffected by their employment circumstances consider the risks of returning to education (Warmington, 2003). However, once again the picture is not positive with suggestions that the employment market may not be a helpful place for mature graduates. Within a wider arena, Sennett (2006) describes a capitalist culture of employers who set their unit’s culture as inflexible. In line with the “Fit” theories, (Schneider, 1987; Chatman, 1989; examined further in the next chapter), Sennett describes how employees who enter the workforce and find a culture clashing with their own beliefs simply move on, effecting the creation of a transient labour market. Many mature graduates, however, are geographically static with family responsibilities and have a reaction to such culture clashes by becoming non-conformist in the workplace environment, resulting in them being difficult to manage. Worse still, in the process this can create a stereotypical impression of older employees, thus leaving a legacy of potential discrimination by employers. In consequence, and regardless of prohibitive legislation, it is simply cheaper and less trouble for employers to employ a young person who can think short term, develop their potential and then move on; “surrender” while regretting nothing.

The Institute of Manpower Studies (IMS), in 1992, warned that employers have indeed been reluctant to take on Mature graduates. The report noted that there was:

*“still a strong preference for young graduates who fit more easily into the graduate entry programme” (Pike et al, 1992:6)*

The “fit” of these programmes is to do with the age restrictions, but, in a longitudinal study of mature graduates Purcell *et al* (2007) confirms that more than a decade later this remains the case with increased difficulty in finding appropriate employment, lower rates of earnings and higher declared satisfaction in their graduate roles. This is a situation which recent legislation (the Age Discrimination

Act, 2006) will attempt to redress, encouraging employers to avoid treating people of different ages less favourably.

#### 4.3.3. Self-Improvement

The publicity for university recruitment campaigns encourages prospective participants to realise their dreams and “*be all they can be*” (Batchelor, 2006). Finance and employment can be interpreted as routes to achieve this, there are alternatives. Chapter 6 will investigate the overall effect of university participation on the students’ self-image, considering frameworks for understanding the processes of definition of selves and others, and of aspiration of self-classification (for example, Social Identity Theory, [Festinger, 1954; Tajfel, 1981] and Social Categorization Theory [Haslam *et al*, 2000; Turner, 1981; Turner *et al*, 1994]. At this point, however, I merely want to introduce the idea that, alongside more obvious fiscal routes, the search for self-improvement can be a powerful motivator for engagement in the first place (Archer *et al*, 2003).

The student identifies with their personal image of someone certified as intellectually superior to others through having been awarded a degree. A basic tenet of many motivational theories is that people set goals for themselves and that these goals can be powerful motivators of behaviour (Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Bandura, 1996). Support for this comes from Christie & Munro (2003) noting that students and their families who withdrew from HE still retained a strong positive orientation towards HE and often invested in the student re-entering another university to try HE a second time. The suggestion is that, having embraced the educational route as legitimate to achieve self-betterment, this was a core, and lasting, belief.

Turning the focus to Mature students, the literature is heavily dominated by female studies, focusing on women wanting to re-train prior to re-entering the labour market (Maher, 2001; Peters, 2000). Mature women rated the highest in terms of changes to self-identity, linking success in Higher Education to self-esteem and

therefore this group of students were identified by Murphy & Roopchand (2003) as particularly vulnerable in HE, and requiring targeted support by the institution. Within the element of “risk” comes “*false uniqueness*” (Thorpe and Snell, 2007), when those from a non-traditional background underestimated their chances of coping academically with the course.

Under the “self-improvement” motivation, Sennett (2006) takes us into an important consideration of his central concept of “usefulness”:

*Feeling useful means contributing something which matters to other people”*  
(2006:189)

Feeling useless evokes the negative response of having nothing to offer, of not mattering in society. Within the study of motivation, education can be identified as a tool to acquire this frame of mind, offering a route to status and professionalism. This train of thought would link with concepts of identity and of recognition; a university degree can be symbolic of society’s recognition or reward, in some cases being perceived as offering a sense of legitimacy, (as recognised by Hoskin and MacVe, 1986 in reference to the introduction of written examinations to legitimise the label of “profession” on accountancy).

Usefulness is a fundamental emotion at the core of human life. Linking in with the institutional purpose debate, I was particularly interested in what Sennett termed “the Culture of the New Capitalism”. Sennett describes the plight of individuals in the current western economies, who have gained high level formal qualifications but are unable to transfer these attributes into economic value, thus ending up under what he terms, “*The Specter of Uselessness*”. In his portrayal of the modern economic culture, people are not currently valued for longevity of service, for experience or for craftsmanship. The global workforce (with the infusion of the Southern hemisphere now offering talented, bi-lingual, university educated youth), combining with the technological explosion, has resulted in a questioning of the value of a traditional education. Instead the focus of industry and business, Sennett

claims, is on the acquisition of short term, transferable skills; employees are expected to move around.

Sennett (2006:88) introduced the concept of a perceived “over qualification” in job applicants. If a job is advertised and the essential criteria does not include a degree, then an applicant from university would be lacking appeal for employers. However, I would challenge that the degree vouches for more than knowledge in the particular subject. The actual process of undertaking and successfully completing a course in HE indicates other qualities, including commitment, sustainability, determination, persistence, even, possibly, an ability to problem-solve when the most routine of jobs go wrong. Sennett’s observations could also have a poignant relevance to the question of institutional choice. If he is right, what would motivate a mature student to choose an Ancient?

#### 4.3.4 Institutional Choice

I have understood Sennett’s view to critique a society which aims modern universities towards skills development. His view also highlights a potential clash with the Ancient culture, more suited towards the craftsmanship style, the acquisition of non-practical skills (for example, the critical thinking mentioned earlier in this chapter) and producing an in-depth knowledge of fine arts, classics and philosophy without direct application vocationally.

So, in considering Sennett’s ideas, if students choose to attend an Ancient on the basis of their preferred learning style, then this would seem to be appropriate. However, if they choose because it is geographically suitable or because they think the Ancient will offer an elite label for their degree, which, critically, is assumed to make them more employable, whatever career they wish to enter, they may be headed for disappointment. Factors such as degree subject, classification of degree, flexibility of location and external factors (for example, age and family commitments) are likely to be more significant criteria in the employability equation.

In the recent battle for students in a competitive market, research examining institutional choice has attempted to highlight the criteria upon which students base their decisions (Briggs, 2006; Tett, 2004; Prescott & Simpson, 2004; Adnett & Slack, 2007). Results revealed a broad range of reasons including one particularly relevant to Mature students, that of “distance from home”. However a common feature of the studies was the listing of “university prestige” or “academic reputation”, suggested as a perception of the marketing, placed, perhaps surprisingly, ahead of graduate employment (Briggs, 2006:714). However, Egerton and Parry (2001) challenges this and offers evidence that, in spite of prestigious reputation, traditional institutions attract few working class Mature students, leading to conjecture that this could be because of their limitation on vocational courses, rural location (sometimes), residential base or academic entry criteria. Whitehead *et al* (2006) found that anxiety about the application process and fear of failure could dissuade applications to an Ancient. This supports other findings of difficulty in Ancients attracting other non-traditional students. For example, Forsyth and Furlong (2000), investigating high achievers at schools in low socio-economic groups in the West of Scotland, found lack of congruence with their perception of themselves attending prestigious, distant universities. Choice seemed to depend on local availability of courses, part-time work opportunities and on their own perceptions of social barriers and class consciousness; an inner battle between local, practical convenience but with self-esteem minimising the chance of successful application.

If we take the first section of this chapter examining what a university expects to be purpose, combining it with this second section describing the motivations of a non-traditional student to engage with HE, the third, and last, section of this chapter looks at the possible areas of tension, or even overt clashes, in the philosophical underpinnings of both.

#### 4.4 Political and Philosophical Tensions

Culture, subcultures, and values each influence the introduction of change thus creating tensions (Huxham and Beech, 2003) and suggestions that the message will not reach the core of institutional function without the processes addressing the socio-emotional and symbolic aspects of the life therein (Middlehurst, 2004). It is worth considering some practical manifestations of the tensions.

##### 4.4.1 Standards *versus* Expansion

Any threat to their academic integrity challenges the core of academics' identity (Becher, 2001). The insistence of academic allowances for those unable to compete in a traditional format creates a dilemma for the maintenance of standards and fairness within the Ancients. The inference is that the placing of the exceptional endorsement of intellectual ability within the easy reach of the majority of young people risks diminishing the very prize people want to win and opens up accusations of "dumbing down". It would seem reasonable for academics to fight to protect their "*Gold Standard*" product (Eustace, 1991:32), perceiving their own reputation to depend on it. Academics may regard the alternative route as second rate, as "bending the rules" (Trow, 1987; Becher, 1989). I would suggest that, in an environment of sustaining exclusivity, the concept of wider access is anathema.

This superior, "all or nothing" attitude can lead to anything less than a degree being discredited, discounting the limitations of opportunities open to some demographic groups and allowing the participants' backgrounds to influence their educational aspirations. This goes to the heart of the government's expansion agenda. The establishment of the balance of "reasonable adjustment" is a major tension in the maintenance of academic standards. Taking into account student special needs<sup>24</sup> requires value judgments from tutors with which they can justifiably feel uncomfortable, given the lack of wider expertise amongst many of them. Training staff increasingly in such a situation relates directly to the purpose of that institution within its political context. Conversely, however, encouraging uniform systems to

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<sup>24</sup> "Special Needs" – see Appendix 1- Definitions

be applied in all cases, as can happen with government directives advising structures of delivery, has been decried as the “Erosion of British Exceptionalism” (Scott, 1995). As Moodie (1991:78) comments, once the guidelines of defined standards are moved to allow flexibility for lower achievement on the basis of mitigating circumstances, the fear is of:

*“less committed, less scholarly or simply less competent entrants”*

In this defensive position, academics can feel a growing sense of isolation within institutions which, increasing in size, develop increasingly formal procedures. The Ancient culture of honour codes and trust seems alien to these large institutions. Unlike primary and secondary education, universities are not accustomed to the formalisation and the delineation of their professional remit (Doherty, 1996). For some the consequences of the changes include the loss of the bonds that once tied the academic “community”, a “slippery” term in this sort of context (Hillery, 1955; Kogan, 2000).

#### 4.4.2 Collegiality *versus* Managerial

At the centre of collegiality is the notion that people share beliefs and trust each other, a collectivity of equals (Weber, 1947) where calling each other into account is unnecessary. Within the university setting, Scott (1995) characterises the core values and beliefs as a desire for intimacy:

*“nostalgia, even grief, for a lost intimacy, an academic Arcadia, acts as a silent drag on progress towards wider access and advance towards mass higher education” (Scott, 1995:7)*

The grief of a “lost intimacy” indicates the tension created by the “academic freedom” tendency for resistance to management control, as discussed in Chapter 3 and is central to the notion of Purpose. Theorists agree that the former concept has a built in resistance to the latter (Lockwood and Davies, 1985:26). Academic freedom encourages freethinking, questioning, and a refusal to accept the blind authority central to, for example, the Classical model.

The result for academics, it has been claimed, is lowered morale (Scott, 1995) and a damaged social and moral responsibility by academics leading to “Disengagement with Citizenship” (Macfarlane, 2005). Not only might academics be seen as alienated from their students but also from their fellow academics with whom they appear to be in constant competition for grants, promotion, etc. Managers, concerned with securing funding, place increasingly onerous burdens of administration on academics who, feeling already burdened with large teaching loads, have an academic reputation dependent on grant acquisition, publishing and citation. The effect of the expansion of HE on academics’ lives has been well documented. Henkel (2000:180) suggests that those who became academics in the 1980s and 1990s effectively joined a different profession from those of 20 years earlier and, I would suggest, this is replicated 20 years later. This sharp change in culture after many centuries of previous stability led to a resistance to the accompanying policy and procedural changes. The change has been too much, too quick, for people to cope with the change in identity as Cuthbert (1991. 126) noted half way through the process. Halsey (1992) writes about the “humbling” of the academic profession and Ramsden (1998:24) describes:

*“the shift from academics as professionals to academics as proletarians”*

However the academic community is not a united body. Multiple rationales allow staff to understand, accept or reject the impressions of others and to define the academic role with terms such as “reasonable” which is liberally sprinkled throughout the discrimination legislation and the government policies (Trow, 1987; O’Connor and Robinson, 1999; Bolt, 2004). It follows therefore that the diversification of the teaching role has seen increasing demand for skill sets which have not been required of academics in the past; alongside pedagogic expertise, new teaching styles, exploring teaching materials etc., acquisition of management, marketing, auditing, and accounting skills have become helpful. In particular, in contrast to some of the Post-1992 universities, there is a lack of written procedures at administrative level in many Ancients which creeps in as a component of the

academic workload to an extent not historically experienced. Much of the accepted procedures are based on historical practice, lack congruence with recent legislation and demand discretion in application disallowing for consistency of usage. Old internal cultural expectations, previously left unsaid and undocumented, are now necessarily being formalised or abandoned as Ancients try to control larger populations of students who are acutely aware of their rights. Ultimately, in order for an academic to feel comfortable that what he/she is being asked to do is within their remit, they first have to have a personal judgement on institutional purpose. If they know what they think the university is aiming for, they will be better placed to define their role within that context.

Within this environment, collegial or managerial, the students take on a particular significance beyond their role as learners. Weighting the debate are the much sought-after students who bring funding with them. Institutions competing for money, resources and status in a fierce, competitive, market essentially view some students as commodities. McNay (1994: 17), for example, describes such a market for a group of non-traditional students emerging in the 1990's typified by:

*“The unseemly scramble in the market for high fee overseas students”*

Such a perspective may be regarded as distasteful to the academic community concentrating on pure knowledge.

However, Wagner (1995) has suggested that such a justification of preferred intimacy is simply an excuse for inertia. I would contend that, to some extent, Wagner is justified in his claim. The intimacy is arguably open to abuse, not only in terms of inertia, but also in a sense of breeding stagnancy and lack of accountability. Nevertheless, one danger of formalising all is that that approach adopts essentially a one-size-fits-all method, the potential problems of which are obvious in a context of a policy encouraging greater user-diversity. Additionally, you can lose more of the goodwill and mutual trust which has developed than it is

healthy for an organisation to part with. Unfortunately, it is a complex task to differentiate the system aspects which should be retained from those that necessarily must be discarded. The university environment could be one example of O'Neill's (2002) proposition of a consequential link between mistrust and development of suspicion in a new institutional culture of mechanical accountability when she argues that governments should:

*“give up childhood fantasies that they can have total guarantee of others’ performance”.*

There is a danger that, by the sheer act of breaking something down and analysing it, the flow and harmony of an easy fit will be lost.

#### 4.4.3 Exclusivity *versus* Inclusion

Heward and Taylor (1993:79) suggest that a resistance to change of an inclusive culture is maintained by traditional ancient universities because it is essential for the core of their survival:

*“Elite institutions maintain their position by exclusivity”*

The basis of “higher” education is that it is lofty, superior, at the peak of the challenge to learn and, within the wider HE sector, the Ancients are the most exclusive of all (Ellis, 1994) with discourses steeped in terms of elitism, exclusivity, restriction. I would maintain that this is a deliberate, self-declared superiority choice made at the expansion point of the 1960s in a determination to maintain their position of difference. In doing so, the principle of equal opportunities is challenged. Rather than a well-considered course of action based on risk assessment, I rather believe the move to an elitist stance has been an instinctive, defensive reaction of institutions driven by a culture of advantage for over 500 years.

All Prospectuses of the Ancients carry an elitist theme (Aberdeen, 2005; Glasgow, 2005; Edinburgh, 2005; St. Andrews, 2005) not only in terms of self-belief but also in societal reinforcement. Ancients demand respect from others on the basis of their age, their history and proven track record of longstanding academic successes, their present research portfolio and their internationalism or global resources. They set themselves up as both special in themselves and offering a special experience to students. Although set within an English context, Ellis (1994:8) labelled what he called the “Oxbridge Conspiracy” which, in my own experience carries a resonance with Ancients in Scotland:

*“England reposes a deep faith in its ancient universities. The dons are not responsible for this. But they encourage it. Indeed, they depend on it for their survival as the supreme achievement of our educational system and made openly in its myths. Who can blame them? They provide the aura; it is society which basks in it and remarks on its wonders”.*

However, deconstruction of the term “elitism” offers alternative interpretation. In the face of an equal opportunity ethos the “elite” term can carry negative connotations:

*“snobby; discriminatory; selective; restricted; exclusive” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005).*

*“traditional universities carry the history of social exclusivity like a dead weight and a constant reproach” Coffield & Williamson (1997:29)*

Tett (2004) conducted one of the few Scottish studies of Mature students in an identified “elite” institution and, in documenting the marginalisation of these students, made comment on the duty of the institution to tackle entrenched inequalities within its walls and begin to understand the structure and progress of the Mature student experience. Blythman and Orr (2002) had previously presented a similar view of institutional “blame” for non-completion of studies by placing a duty on the universities to meet the students’ needs.

The defence offered by these institutions is that, while rejecting social elitism within their organisations, they find academic elitism to be justifiable. However the acceptability of this is questioned further when academic achievements are influenced or restricted by social circumstances: low socio-economic background, poor schooling, lack of educational opportunities and lack of finance to progress in study (Thomas, 2001; Woodward and Ross, 2000). The restriction of opportunity to prove ability draws a parallel with Critical Theory objections to declared meritocracies whose definition of merit has been undertaken and reinforced by a powerful elite, legitimising systems the very purpose of which is to uphold class and wealth advantages (Bilton, 2006; Daniels, 1978; Young, 2001).

#### 4.4.4 Knowledge *versus* Skills Training

The tension around the Knowledge Transfer purpose debate addressed initially in the UK by the Open University (Tudor, 1977) was demonstrated in the acceptability of quantitative audits of university success based on graduate employment figures. It is at the centre of the refusal of academics to accept the view that they are employed on a product basis, their products being employable graduates.

The role of employers of new graduates within the knowledge/skills debate should not be underestimated. In terms of their relevance to society, the reluctance of Ancient institutions to engage in a discussion of their responsibility to this sector has left the impression of a group which retains what Moodie (1991:9) calls:

*“a spirit hostile to economic enterprise and unsuited to the “world of work”*

This tension, although directly relating to the institutional purpose debate, is nevertheless experienced in institutions where excellent academic records may be achieved but where institutional audits by funding councils will attempt to measure “employability” of students. Amongst non-traditional students, the employability of Mature students has to be carefully factored in to audit procedures.

In terms of managing individual expectations of purpose, the safer option would appear to be to follow Newman's philosophy, highlighting the purpose of a university education as being the place to teach people to think. The provision of centres offering the opportunity for enlightenment and excellence refocuses responsibility for the degree use firmly back to the student and away from the institution. It also achieves the desired separation of the concepts of intellectual excellence and financial wealth (related to University of Paris's poverty discussed in Chapter 3 – Lunden, 1932: 97).

There are now accusations of a societal skills imbalance created by the increase in university participation and consequentially ill-equipping Scottish society for some of its vital trades and businesses. In 2005, the British Chamber of Commerce raised cries that employers did not support the Labour Government target of over 50% of young people entering universities, but rather asked for them to be trained directly for the workplace (Guardian, 8 February, 2005). Their view does not imply that any construct of a university should have enforced refocus of mission of liberal arts, pure science, or development of critical thinking. However, while their legitimacy is one thing, societal appropriateness is another. Universities with vocational courses go some way towards appeasing the accusation of irrelevancy. This is a critical area for this thesis: my interpretation is of the acceptance of whole range of further and higher education, but with necessary clarity of purpose of each sector and of the appropriate balance of provision from all sectors according to society's needs. It goes some way towards the claim by Halsey earlier in this chapter.

#### **4.5. Summary**

The mature student literature has developed with focus initially on health sector education, but has largely neglected the Scottish university sector. This is a position which is now being rectified with the influence of funding pressures on

institutions demanding that attention be given to understanding non-traditional students. A critical aspect of retention has been linked with meeting expectations.

In my study, the set of 29 Mature student studies identified in Appendix 4 forms the basis of the literature review of Mature student research used in this and the following two chapters. Occasionally, a study outside of this set is included when it displays particular characteristics of relevance to the discussion.

The Ancients have now established a niche of superiority after the expansion of the university sector and their prospectuses demonstrate them to be defending their elitist stance in terms of academic prowess. I would suggest that the mission to extend universities' relevance in economic and productive contexts may have corrupted their sense of purpose, challenged their underpinning philosophies and put them in a place now where an increasingly loud mantra voiced by the academic community, especially in Ancients, is that the integrity of academics is being threatened. My review of the literature so far suggests that Ancients are trying to be all things to all people while society is calling for different types of HE to be formally acknowledged with associated identified purposes and a careful consideration of balance of these. Universities need to be able to demonstrate their economic usefulness in order to continue to gain unquestioned funding from the public system. However their wish to retain their academic elitist credentials with freedom of choice and curriculum management places them in a state of tension.

Government discourses indicate that there is considerable potential economic benefit to individuals to engage with a course of study at a university (DfEE, 1998) and studies have agreed with this as an applicant perception (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). However, I would suggest that, once one goes into the detail of the expectation of what exactly is being bought, a mismatch exists between that and what is perceived to be offered. Already there are initial differences noted between non-traditional students and traditional students. In terms of motivation, non-traditional students are less likely to view university as a default after secondary

education. Once in university, they have fewer recognisable mentors and role models to follow. However, they do seem to be drawn in by the thought of a better lifestyle (Davies, 2001). There is also evidence that they have a greater need to feel what Sennett (2006) would call “useful” having completed their degree. The funding commitment is more intense, with documented difficulties of such a risky investment. The problems include loan repayment problems, domestic commitments (e.g. dependent families), and the sacrifice of daytime wages. For the future, the problems do not necessarily ease up with evidence of employers preferring younger graduates (Sennett, 2006; Purcell *et al*, 2007).

The matching of the two, purpose and expectations, has given rise to a number of identifiable tensions, a concept applied in this chapter with reference to its use in the employment setting by Cairns and Beech (1999a). Within the Ancient university setting these tensions are increasingly apparent at a time of wider participation, accountability to government, and where managerial and economic values clash with philosophical ones. Any easing of the tensions will depend on a compromise of identity by one party, or a clear, transparent understanding of each part of the equation to enable an informed choice of suitability of match between the two to be made. Although there are cautions against specialism in institutions, there are, nevertheless, questions to ask about the naiveté of assuming that all students will have a guaranteed suitable experience at all institutions while specific institutional purpose continues to be ambiguous.

This chapter has highlighted student expectations identified in the literature and, by comparison, the purposes attributed to universities, proposing that success and/or failure of the marriage of the two, dictates the quality of the student experience and the level of tensions experienced on both sides. We should now understand, in a new and better way, how to tackle the critical research question and the available theories to enable us to engage with that question. The chapter researches the first stage of the interaction and moves the thesis on to the connection phase.

## Chapter 5

### Merging the Student and the University

#### *During the Interaction*

##### **5.1 Introduction**

The literature on mainstreamed<sup>25</sup> students' daily lives in the UK has been recognised as scarce (Silver and Silver, 1997) and this is much the same a decade later with much of the empirical research focused predominantly on the students' roles as learners. The 1992 British Further and Higher Education Act expansion of the HE sector changed the self-perception of students fundamentally to one of consumer, placing them, from that point on, in an audit role with an opinion on institutional service. Although, as far back as 1858, students had been included in university governance, this had been primarily tokenistic, the enduring view being that students were privileged to enter universities (Silver and Silver, 1997). However, studies have sought to respond to the governance agenda and student feedback evidencing institutional strategic actions, often harvested through student satisfaction surveys, has been popular since 1990 (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Green *et al*, 1994). Students' opinions have grown to become a vital consideration in the institutional audit process conducted by funding councils, and, through this process, funding is inextricably linked to the student experience. While researchers are creating the theories on how to enhance the experience, policy-makers and management throughout the HE sector are taking a keen interest in data production. The era of testing many of the theories proposed is, for some, underway, but for many lies further down the line.

Since the 1990s the literature has also included the study of diversity and the effect of particular demographic backgrounds on learning and achievement. Unlike other areas of the student experience literature, Mature student literature has generally

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<sup>25</sup> "Mainstreamed" - see Appendix 1 - Definitions

placed some focus on the whole, rather than solely the learning, experience (Cantwell *et al*, 2001; Ozga and Sukhandan, 1998). However, consistent throughout the literature is the identification of extra barriers for learning in practical financial and family terms, unfamiliar language, inaccessible teaching format and lack of staff preparation.

This chapter concentrates on the interaction point between the student and the university and examines the processes, both the mechanics and the implications, of such interaction. It begins by exploring the theoretical literature, mostly from the field of psychology, studying the development of identity, a key concept in this study exploring how the university experience can affect our personal identity. It goes on to discuss the theoretical backdrop which overhangs the area of social integration and the bonding of an individual into an organisation. Empirical literature following Mature students' daily life strategies is outlined, with particular focus on areas of part-time employment, health and family responsibilities. The resources needed to engage with HE are explored, including accommodation, transport and financial commitment. Finally documentation of the interaction between the student and the university systems is assessed.

## **5.2 Developing Identity**

There are clear challenges to the concept that Mature students, or any other group artificially labelled together by a common demographic factor, are, in fact a homogeneous group. To investigate them as a separate group assumes that there are more, similar, shared experiences for them than there are differences between them. How do the individuals in such a group come to define themselves? And how do these same individuals redefine or reform their identity when plunged into a new environment with different rules of behaviour, a different belief system?

The complexities of modern life compel us to live within a number of different, sometimes conflicting, identities representing what Burr (1995) termed "threads" woven together to create the fabric of our overall identity. The multi-faceted

configuration of the individual is emphasised when we think of the role each person plays when simply standing still; parent, offspring, sibling, friend, student, employee. Further roles are adopted on entering the HE environment. The cultural influences defining identity roles can create a situation where role conflicts occur as individuals contribute and respond to competing demands; social, familial and economic groups present varying expectations and demands. Studies within Psychology have identified the triggers, management and consequences of these (Earley, 1997; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Locke and Latham, 1990; Sen, 2006).

Identity, allowing focus on the person within, understanding who and what they are, is a highly contested area theoretically (Moorcroft, 1997). Subjectivity describes the sense of self, the unconscious, sometimes irrational, emotional, perspective. It is with this aspect of identity that we react to the world around us, and the environments in which we immerse ourselves, relevant to students making sense of their university setting. Since adolescence is the critical time for identity development (Radford and Govier, 1991), a university, with the vast majority of its population in the late stages of this becomes an environment which encapsulates a hive of activity as people find out who they are and who they want to be. Life-altering, structural changes to the adolescent's life cause anxiety, ambiguity of roles and intellectual challenges which he/she will not have faced before. The relevance to those leaving behind a comfortable, established role in society to enter university for the first time is obvious.

Coleman (1980) divides core texts on identity, emphasising the influence of both psychoanalytic (Freud, 1901; Blos, 1962) and sociological influences (Erikson, 1965) on the process. Conflicts in views of socially acceptable behaviour, "identity versus role confusion" (Erikson, 1965), are, however, not limited to adolescence and such conflicts can emerge when the adult is moved from his/her familiar surroundings and faces new challenges at any age. The Mature student has to redefine his/her self and the environment in which he/she is now immersed. In

some cases this might be the first point at which the person has consciously thought of the notion of “self”: the way that they are, how they behave, what they believe in, how they present themselves, and how others see them. Marcia (1966, 1980) has added to Erikson’s work by describing some states that adults can enter into when reforming an identity. Of particular interest is his “identity diffusion” in which the student will be unclear of his/her identity, aims or role in his/her current environment. Ultimately Marcia describes the “identity achievement” as an aim that others studying university students (Waterman, 1974; Schwartz *et al*, 2000), found unlikely to be reached until final year. The decision to enter a university is a deliberate decision of “life-changing” proportions by definition and thus will influence an “identity-changing” process. Recent qualitative evidence of the emotional “rollercoaster ride” details the “*intrinsically emotional*” process for non-traditional students of becoming a university student (Christie *et al*, 2007). Social circles are broken, new relationships established, past financial stability and past relationships risked, new worlds with new discourses entered into. When both the old and the new lifestyles are combined to any degree, the anxiety and ambiguity of roles are confounded.

Baxter and Britton (2001) supported a view from Brine and Waller (2004) of the risk in the identity change process; the complexity of self-reflection, discarding of old and adoption of new, hybrid identities, linking also with Reay’s (1998) reference to working class students having their existing identity attacked by the HEI change of values. The notion of identity crisis is particularly highlighted in the studies of women and family responsibilities compromising the time that Mature students, of both genders, have available to socialise. Those who do not make the comfortable adjustment are relegated to an “Out-Group” (Humphrey, 2006; Cooke *et al*, 2004; Kember & Leung, 2004).

In the formation of the new identity or at the least, the reformation of the old, a necessity exists for integration of the two separate lives of home and university. Referring to Self Categorization Theory (Turner, 1981; 2000; Turner *et al*, 1994)

the Mature student has to make a leap in order to reflect upon their “self” in the role of student, a role more generally standardised as belonging to the adolescent school-leaver. In order to be effective, they will have to envision themselves, and be comfortable with themselves, in the role of an older person in a young world, but also, in an alternating existence, a young student in an older family life role.

Identity is at the core of the experience, although, critically, some facets of identity are amenable to change, others not. This leads us to a key theoretical debate within the study of identity taking the essentialist or non-essentialist stance. A helpful perspective uses the lenses of “Structure” and “Agency” (Woodward and Ross, 2000), the degree of the inevitability of being influenced by external factors or of being in the “driving seat”. Using this perspective within a context of identity, structure follows the essentialist perspective and makes assumptions of limited ability for an individual to control their identity. Exponents of this philosophy will see identity as formed by external factors and as fixed; based on biological or historical characteristics deemed unchangeable. Divisions, which cut across this analysis, have been identified (Bem and Allen, 1974; Bem, 1983), including disability, race, gender, and sexuality, thus challenging the essentialist position as being too simplistic. The influences of gender have dominated much literature but other, separate, defining functions of identity (for example, race, ethnicity), combining with the gender, have been neglected with some notable exceptions (Fearfull and Kamenou, 2006). The apparent conflict between the two can be reconciled but only if structure is seen as both a tool and the resulting outcome of agency, (for example, in the Theory of Structuration [Giddens, 1984]).

Once again, the government wider access agenda becomes an aspect of this debate. A dip into the political literature shows that social characteristics may sit in the middle ground but attention needs to be drawn to social divisions which can illustrate what are viewed as fixed influences. This links with the Marxist analysis of the base/superstructure relationship (Marx, 1954) and with it claims that the economic, class structure of society is a primary force in fixing identity,

emphasising that there is little that an individual can do to control their situation and circumstances (short of engineering a socio-economic revolution.)

The contrasting view, Agency, refers to individual means of controlling the formation of identity and it is here that the HE sector can offer much. The development of individual agency is, in fact, the single most important contribution that the Ancient institution can offer in my opinion (but this will be returned to in Part V). The non-essentialist school sees identity as fluid and having different elements which can be reconstructed in different social, educational and cultural environments (Bem and Allen, 1974; Markus and Nurius, 1986). More autonomy and control lies in the hands of the individual, emphasising that the self can be developed by seeking out and following up on ideas of choice. (This understanding of identity is critical within the Social Constructionist approach which will be described further in Chapter 8.)

The new social movements emerging in the West in the 1960s during a peak time of student unrest and anti-war activism aligned themselves with the non-essentialist perspective on identity, (Woodward, 1997: 24). However, the whole essentialist/non-essentialist debate on identity is far from straightforward (Sen, 2006; Davis, 2004) with elements such as personal choice (Hall, 1990) and plurality of identity within individuals (Bhabba, 1994) being recognised. Even if acknowledged, the separate treatment of those aspects of identity seen as essentialist will be morally debated. The necessity to “even the playing field” by allowing extra focus (e.g. prompting the Women’s Movement, given the biological peculiarities of women giving birth) has led to accusations of unfair positive discrimination. The claim carries significant implications for this study and reverts to a theme emerging from the literature asking if non-traditional students would benefit more from mainstreamed HE or if they should receive particular and specialised focus such as in an Access environment.

In a reflection of the “Nature/Nurture” debate, and in parallel with the essentialist/non essentialist dimensions of individual identity, two strands of theories once more emerge in the interpretation of environment. These strands identify the world as being either a fundamentally fixed entity, the features of which need to be identified, or as encompassing a fluid, organic set of processes where multiple realities exist and are constructed and re-constructed by social actors. The view adopted is crucial to the success of maintaining stability or orchestrating change within an organisation.

The non-essentialist view offers the potential for a definition of a Mature student identity which considers different components of role, and of political and cultural discourses (Canaan, 2004), combining these with different individual histories. This perspective recognises the complexities of the identity concept and therefore presents a problem for organisational managers trying to classify a group of individual students as an integrated, definable homogeneous group. Nevertheless, as has been argued (Woodward, 1965), from this perspective, identities can be forged through the marking of difference, and for the purposes of this study, the non-essentialist perspective allows for the differences to be highlighted and the formation of an identity to be examined through that route. Such an approach can undoubtedly challenge the position of prevailing systems.

This raises the interesting question as to whether students sharing a similar demographic profile share a similar experience of university. Blaxter and Tight (1993), a study published at the peak of the process of UK’s “massification” (Trow, 1987) of Higher Education gives some indication. This study examined the demographic pattern of part-time students, along with some of the motivations, performance, background history and experience. Somewhat surprisingly, although expected to be very different in terms of age, educational experience, and employment, these students emerged as a clearly homogeneous group, raising interest in the Labelling Theory claim of the grouping of people *because of* their sharing similar social features (Lemert, 1951) something I was avoiding in age

terms in my study. However, the possibility that the common experience of study offers a unifying culture post-arrival at the institution is one which is worthy of consideration, but one of age is a different matter. There also has to be recognition that the label of “Mature” may be utilitarian in enabling access to resources for Mature students to facilitate their experience at university. There exists an inherent warning to be wary when categorising people in neat packages with expectations of dominating influences of demographics, a point emphasised in a recent study by Waller (2006). Waller examined the usefulness of defining “Mature” students as a homogeneous group, subsequently sub-dividing them by ethnicity, class, gender and age, finding the group to be too complex and heterogeneous to offer representation from research undertaken in this format. This viewpoint is contrary to those mentioned earlier in this chapter where identity formation is linked with a recognised difference (Woodward, 1965).

Labelling and identification of students as part of an “Out-Group” can lead to them seeking solace in each other. Mature students could be expected to be marginalised because their status, age, financial limitations or family commitments prohibits them from joining the “master”/mainstreamed group because of age. Labelling theorists examine those recognised as “deviants” who create a subsequent deviant behaviour pattern in order to create validity for themselves and thus attract other “deviants” (Lemert, 1951; Becker, 1963). The examination of the students in this study within the context of deviance from the mainstreamed students leads to consideration of a need for an identifiable valid grouping separate to the master group and with assigned appropriate behaviour and norms. Labelling can, therefore, create deviance but can also bring cohesion to a group.

The classification of Mature students as an “Out-Group” will influence the integration process for them. However a subtle form of discrimination more commonly experienced by Mature students at the younger end of the spectrum would be to treat them exactly the same as younger, mainstreamed students, thus not making allowances or giving credit for extra life experience. Beliefs,

responsibilities and social circumstances may vary between all students but the differences between a thirty year old student and an immediate school leaver are likely to be substantial and yet little has been done to explore them, with still less evidence of influencing university student policy.

### **5.3 Integration**

Consideration of Mature students as units to be processed echoes the Classical School of Management. In the 1950s the introduction of the human element to the development of management theory mirrors the questions being raised by those currently examining the student experience. How important is social or academic integration to the successful student experience? Do Mature students need to work together or are they content to operate as individuals within the university environment?

The Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1949) critically demonstrated how individuals relate to their work environment handling the potential of organisational manipulation through human emotions. The choosing of individuals to take part in an experiment was seen as influential in changing work output from the workers singled out or grouped together. The original test assessing the pace and quantity of work produced by workers under different levels of lighting in Chicago plants then took a lesser emphasis when Mayo's team surmised that previously unrecognised emotional needs of workers, e.g. to belong and feel secure, were in fact central themes of passive interaction between the individual and the organisation.

In the current climate of a Government promoting a "wellbeing" agenda, this finding may seem straightforward. However, Mayo's results were not without criticism; even early colleagues raised doubts about his developing interpretation (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). Mayo claimed that the results signified the increased importance of the social structure rather than the original physical structure on productivity, which was consequently marginalised. Homans observed however that the social effects registered were, in fact, triggered by a change in the

physical structure in the first place when the workers were removed from under the direct supervision of their line managers hence the “Hawthorne Effect” (in Hatch, 1997:242).

In the context of people management, the Hawthorne experiments provided the first theoretical claim that “No man is an island” and that the social environment is critical. The recognised needs of the individual have subsequently developed and placed the worker in an interactive field with other workers and systems around him/her. As Child (1984:177) notes:

*“While needs such as subsistence and personal safety might appear to be absolute and universal in nature, further consideration indicates that even these are subject to a social definition which varies from society to society as well as between classes within society”*

Following from this, a major body of literature within the Organisational Psychology and Management fields has developed, focusing on the facilitation of an individual’s socialisation. The literature surrounding this area is concerned with the tools an organisation uses to “smooth off the rougher edges” once an individual is within (Van Maanen, 1978). Integration follows the individual learning, understanding and, finally, adoption of an organisational stance through a socialisation process (Feldman, 1976). It has been described in terms of learning what is expected of oneself, of “learning the ropes” (Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Historically it has been seen as a one way, pedagogic, process with the individual passing through clearly identifiable stages until reaching some identified target point ending with the placement of the individual “inside”. However, the time-limited description of this process has gone on to be challenged with perspectives within literature identifying individual socialisation as an ongoing process (Adkins *et al*, 1994; Chao *et al*, 1994).

Classic texts for organisational socialisation include Schein, (1970, 1971), Feldman (1981) and Fisher (1986), all focusing on behaviours, values and goals as

comparative features indicating measurements of socialisation. Themes include learning the tasks involved for performance within the setting, establishing satisfying relationships with people and gaining information on the power politics within the organisation. The organisation's historical culture has to be understood and engaged with, within its contextual framework of behaviour, norms, and values. Ritti and Funkhouser (1987) describe how the engagement allows organisations to perpetuate the development of a certain type of member while Kahneman and Miller's (1986) Norm Theory describes how, in summarising what we know about people, we use a shared norm for a particular category to assist with grouping them, necessarily condemning some members to be excluded from the full social involvement and thereby creating the "In" and "Out" groups (Allport, 1954) referred to in Chapter 2.

In summary, "Socialisation" follows the process of an individual entering an organisation, observing and learning their culture, positioning themselves in relation to that culture and, interpreting their relationship with it and adopting it, becoming part of the core belief system of that organisation. The theories surrounding self-identity and self-categorisation take the discussion further to ask in which group someone would see himself or herself belonging. "Integration" is, however, a slightly different process in my mind, this term describing students perhaps not becoming part of the core belief system, but adjusting until they can define a relationship between themselves and the other institutional members and institutional systems with the aim of minimising conflict. The adjustment process has had numerous terms in the literature, for example, "search for belongingness" (Kember *et al*, 2001), and "need to connect" (Stark and Warne, 1999), all terms complementing the socialisation and integration literature surrounding those fitting within a culture until it begins to feel comfortable to the individual.

I have tended to use the term "Integration" within this study since, although the individual in the study may not necessarily accept the institution's core beliefs absolutely, he/she could still bond with some aspect of institutional function and the

conflict will be minimised. Integration is also adaptable for usage in the social or the academic setting, both of which need sharp review. The question of whether or not Mature students integrate is an area of empirical focus for this study.

Literature focusing particularly on the student experience of integration in an Ancient university setting has been scarce historically, although significant literature has been identified with reference to integration of students in other learning environments, including Police college (Engelson, 1999), Trainee Civic Journalists (McDevitt *et al*, 2002) and Military Academy (Franke and Heinecken, 2001). Additionally, some studies have concentrated on group adjustment in the younger school-age setting. Identified factors influencing success in school studies have included positive parental influence, (Grusec and Goodnow, 1994); acceptance/rejection by peers (Wentzel and Asher, 1995) and personal attributes which encourage motivation e.g. perceived autonomy, competence, and belongingness (Connell and Wellborn, 1991). While not directly applicable, these findings have possible parallels in HE in terms of managing concepts such as the definition of “attachment”.

Since 2000, however, a new body of literature set in the HE environment has begun to develop. Initially focusing on the academic, the influence of prior learning in a different environment (Cantwell and Scevak, 2004) and its influence on academic progress (Lahteenoja and Pirttila-Backman, 2005) have been studied. However the specific correlation between social and cultural integration (as opposed to academic integration) and retention of students (Wilcox *et al*, 2005, Christie *et al*, 2004) has been highlighted in this other body of literature, reflecting a shift in focus when institutions began to have funding conditions firmly placed on expectations by the government to retain the students once admitted, thus changing emphasis to the experience of the students. One of the few older studies of student integration by Simons and Parlett described the “disorientation” of young students’ first weeks in HE (1976:5):

*“Perhaps the most marked change is that during his or her last year of school, the average student has been enclosed in a highly pressured, structured academic world, pursuing A levels..... Coming from the sixth form the effect can be like entering an academic decompression chamber”*

This description of the adjustment of first years coming from school to student life, domestically, administratively, socially and intellectually, still rings true, thirty years on. Assistance to social integration is usually the responsibility of Students’ Associations while universities have, until relatively recently, seen their role as restricted to academic integration. This is, however, changing, with, I would suggest, a growing recognition on the part of university management that integration can be a factor in the successful performance of students.

When examining the literature on individuals identifying with a group, one defined criteria by Ashford & Mael (1989) notes that the individual does not need to expend any effort on the group’s aims, but must necessarily be tied up with the fate of the group. This helpfully places the Mature student entwined in the fate of that year’s entry class, the aim presumably being to graduate. Researchers have examined the success of particular systems designed with the direct purpose of cultivation of integration to a group. Assistance to academic integration can be extended from information prior to entry, to altering teaching format or facilitation of introduction to others in a similar profile position. Stark and Warne’s (1999) study involved distance learning students, and a key factor was identified as the need for students to experience a connection with, in particular, their academic tutor. Kember *et al* (2001), for example, went on to describe the success of encouraging small group teaching settings. Murphy (2003) examined the learning experience in a co-operative setting allowing students to acquire essential experiential skills in work placements which facilitated integration. Once again, however, much of the literature in this area is in the academic setting.

The concept of “belongingness”, an outcome of integration and, one would think, with a wider application than academic focus, is a demonstrably more elusive

concept in the non-traditional student literature. One of Kember *et al's* (2001) examples established that, while financial constraints have a major impact on student entry and retention, students from non-traditional backgrounds experienced other impacts, including confusion of role and self-identity. Personal sacrifice was noted especially within, what Kember and Leung (2004) term “*the domain of the self*”. The significant difference identified in the integration literature, however, is the claim that distinctly non-traditional students declare social integration to be relatively unimportant. Although concentrating on working class students, Tett’s (2000) findings are interesting in their context of the Scottish Ancient HE setting. In a number of studies, she has described the ancient university setting as an “alien environment” to working class students, in contrast to the atmosphere necessary for belongingness to cultivate. In a further study, Bamber and Tett (2001), focused on the integration phase of the learning experience and stressed that it was critical for universities, and their managers, to accept that the implications of offering access to non-traditional students in compliance with social inclusion targets does not *end* but rather *begins* at point of entry. Bamber and Tett described the necessity for resolution of internal and external influences on all students’ lives but indicated that non-traditional students may have a greater task, with pressing demands on the external factors in the equation. This was reinforced by Read *et al* (2003) who acknowledged the external demands as being one factor in making settling down harder work for Mature students.

In the next chapter, student retention studies will be examined in detail, but it is worth highlighting at this stage that the early classic theoretical models explaining student attrition (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella, 1985) had, as a key component, the focus on students in the late adolescent age-range and a strong positive relationship between social integration and retention. Duquette (2000) however, provides a study critical for this review for, although focused on disabled students in Canada, it highlights fundamental priorities for non-traditional students which beg comparison elsewhere. Applying Tinto’s model and using a qualitative methodology, Duquette highlighted the influencing factors in successful academic performance. Refuting

Tinto, Duquette concluded that background family characteristics and academic integration were the primary influences. Within the university setting the important focus was on building relationships with Professors and teachers, but, although social integration at university may have been an added bonus, it was not seen as a critical priority for these non-traditional students and was significant for academic purposes only. This would seem to contrast with the findings of Hall and Powney (1998), focusing on Scottish Mature students. In a study of “Access Centres” (formed to provide additional preparation to counteract the effects of disadvantage), they asserted that the experience of these Mature students differed from other Mature students in one critical aspect: social isolation from peers was less of a problem as they already had an established support network. Their finding implies social interaction was a problem for other, mainstreamed Mature students not on streamed Access courses.

Additional evidence that integration can improve performance in non-traditional students was found primarily in the disability studies; the integration of disabled students with non-disabled ones was identified as effective in assisting learning for the disabled students (Taylor & Palfreyman-Kay, 2000). Kowalsky and Fresko (2002) supported this with a study of visually impaired and learning disabled students advocating peer tutoring as a means of improving integration and academic performance of *both* tutors and tutees.

Nevertheless, I find Duquette’s study disconcerting since all three of these apparently contradictory studies are still focusing on *academic* integration. If significant resources are to be put into ensuring that social, as distinct from academic, integration is a key variable in student-university interaction we have to be sure that it actually is influential in improving Mature students’ own reflection on the student experience, otherwise a great deal of time and effort will be wasted. It may be that both viewpoints can exist in parallel with each other, while the non-traditional student maintains a separate “social” life external to the university. The debate on the significance of integration overlaps with that which recognises the

variable abilities of different groups of students to engage, in practical terms, with the student experience. The life of a non-traditional student is likely to involve external factors of a pressing nature: dependent children; partners; jobs; disability, and health issues and Cooke *et al* (2004) actually quantify the smaller period of time spent by non-traditional students socialising at university, whether through necessity or choice. The traditional, adolescent, entrant focuses on university as being the core of their life for the time they are there. University *is* their world. It is a central part of their development into adulthood. In contrast, Mature students will have a ready-made external social circle – the University is likely to be only a part of their world, perhaps even only a peripheral part. The high marriage dissolution rate of Mature students at university is well documented with some studies questioning why, in particular, Mature students starting a course at university are likely to end up with a degree but with no spouse (Berman Brown, 2006). The evidence has suggested that a period of HE study can put a marriage under severe strain and that a high percentage will end painfully before the course is finished. Of course, an obvious question is whether a course of study was sought as an escape from an unhappy or unfulfilling relationship at home in the first place?

Examining further its relationship with study success, social integration was found to have a positive effect on academic adjustment and the absence of psychological distress (Chartrand, 1992: 200), both factors in poor academic performance and student attrition. The link therefore may be indirect rather than directly causal. Social integration, *per se*, may not be linked directly to academic outcome, but I would agree with Chartrand that its association with positive, happier experiences and a reduction in feelings of isolation must, in turn, be connected with retention and therefore, indirectly, to better performance. This argument, however, has its limitations. Although studying Mature students in the United States, Chartrand further claimed that while commitment influenced academic adjustment, the converse was not found and, somewhat surprisingly, academic adjustment did not affect commitment.

### 5.3.1 “Fit”- An Integration Measure

Within the Industrial Psychology literature, the “fit theorists” (Schneider, 1987; Chatman, 1989; O’Reilly *et al*, 1991) quantifiably measured the statistical “fit” of an individual’s characteristics in comparison with a similar measurement taken from an average of the organisational profile, and drew conclusions from the comfort of that fit. They then examined the influences which can change that measurement and the consequences of having a fit which is uncomfortable or, indeed, too comfortable. Introducing diversity to an organisation was shown to have advantages and disadvantages for both parties in the fit equation with results showing that the closer the recruits “fitted” the organisation, the longer they stayed and the higher their levels of performance and commitment. However those who did not “fit” were more likely to leave an organisation, leaving behind those who agreed with the organisational image and therefore the fit studies carry implicit warnings of a consistently homogeneous organisation with a potential for developing stagnancy.

Two of the most commonly used examples of the fit theories are that of Schneider’s (1987) Attraction, Selection and Attrition (ASA) framework, and Chatman’s (1989) Person-Organization Fit (POF) both of which track the development of people with the same personalities, values and attitudes within an organisation. Furthermore, both frameworks suggested that individuals, right from the beginning, select the organisation on this basis of a perceived “fit” between themselves and the organisation, while organisations also select their new members with a similar perspective. The “Fit” literature, although originating within the context of Human Resources recruitment and selection, is relevant for this study when examining the introduction of non-traditional students to the ancient universities. As I have described, the Ancients have, at least since the 1960s, developed a reputation for being of the “social elite” (Ellis, 1994), with claims that they have become, on the whole, residential establishments with the lowest rates of inclusion from socio-groups IV and V (Reay, 2003). The fit theories might suggest that the exclusive recruitment is a self-fulfilling prophecy which each party subscribes to; with staff

recruiting like-minded students, and only like-minded students wanting to, or being encouraged to, apply. Indeed, were the fit theories to be applied to Ancients, one could be forgiven for sensing doom to the suggestion of introducing diversity.

The methodology of the fit measurement studies has however been challenged. A quantitative method, measuring the Person-Organization Fit (O'Reilly *et al*, 1991), necessarily uses values disclosed in questionnaires and plotted on a numerical scale known as the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP). The matching “characteristic” of the organisation can pose a problem with a vague definition which could encapsulate values, beliefs, or more demographics such as the age of colleagues, or factors such as the way people dress. The simplicity of reducing people to one huge factor disallows for the complex nature of a multitude of characteristics and thus the choice of the predominant one for the measurement process has to be open to bias. The use of a quantitative methodology when dealing with cultural concepts is an area that will be explored further in Chapter 8 in reference to my study. Doubts spring from the very roots of the Interactionist perspective; the possibility has to be considered that some people just simply have personal strengths or personality for commitment based on background values, prior learned experiences or biological genetics which may encourage them to commit strongly to any organisation.

The Fit theorists suggest that changing personnel is a time-consuming and disruptive process, and that “excellent” organisations are filled with consistent, like-minded people with a shared vision. The argument which proposes homogeneity as the best way forward takes little account of the evidence that diversity and the innovation of external influences can lead an organisation to expand its ideas and its productivity giving it the edge of competitive advantage (Porter 1985).

### 5.3.2. Discourses – An Integration Tool

The study of Discourse Analysis, rooted in the early work of Foucault (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) has recently corralled international authors such as Howarth (2000) and Torfing (1999), and crosses disciplines (sociology, linguistics,

anthropology, psychology) in its search for the interpretation of language which goes beyond the literal combination of words. Although recognising that the literature surrounding discourses and discourse analysis is vast, the perspective of the concept that is particularly relevant to this study is as a tool of integration, and a dominant one, either facilitating or hindering integration (Stratta and MacDonald, 2001). In offering a window on the interpretation of life within, examination of discourses can offer distinct, and, sometimes, conflicting images.

Within the HE setting, Lawrence (2001) claims that, in order to integrate, students have to speak the language acceptable to academics who assume that languages and literacies other than those of the dominant mainstream represent a deficit on the part of that student. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and cross-cultural communication theory, Lawrence outlined Higher Education as a rapidly changing climate forced by diversity, ensuring that this common internal language acquisition is essential. She then sees the institutional duty as one of facilitating this process, and thus integration, by ensuring students acquire the ability to access and engage in these unfamiliar discourses. Supporting this, Round (2005) argued that established discourses within HE affect not only how people talk about universities but also how they understand it. Round claims students leave their familiar discourses of the outside world, and learn to adjust their language by acquiring that used within the university setting as part of the integration process.

Much of the discourses used around the university are linked with an interpretation of the purpose of the student experience. Round's (2005) study of student discourses cites examples of university being compared to the "Real World", thus devaluing the university experience. The discourse surrounding the description of university as a place where students learn to think makes assumptions that students will learn the capacity to form and express original ideas, but assumes that responsibility does not lie with the university to reward students for learning rote facts. This university discourse clashes with the business community discourse of "action orientation", and "target driven", since university focus is on theory and

thought processes. Round highlighted the significant potential for damaging miscommunications and lack of harmony to develop in the wrong circumstances. The discourses in HE, often established by the younger, mainstreamed community (around, for example, terms such as “common sense”, “freshers”, “matric”, “student mentors”) can remain alien for, in particular, the Mature student or the working class student (supporting Canaan, 2006; Reay, 1998). Waller (2005) points out that for some in his study even the term “student” was problematic, since the definition of matriculated status alters between universities. If there are no fundamental basic definitions which are standard, the rules of what is acceptable, expected or prohibited to say in different contexts are misunderstood and, following that, unacceptable words are used to say things which do not need, or, indeed, should not be said. Whether discourses influence behaviour, or are expressions emerging from behaviour, they are used as analytical tools, offering a window on the expressions of potential clash of lifestyles in the one person.

Round’s work also reflected discourse clash at home, describing the small scale “chipping away” of comfortable communication in a home environment where the student’s language is changing. The particular HE discourses within an Ancient may be more familiar to the mainstreamed students because of their age or their social class, while the Mature students are placed at a further disadvantage. These clashes will be felt more acutely by students switching between the two environments more regularly (for example, students with family responsibilities) and for students where the environments are starkly contrasted (for example, students with strong religious affiliations or international students). However, taking this further with relevance to student retention and attrition, it may be possible to see how successful acquisition of one university discourse could lead to possible alienation of a previous, external discourse used prior to entry.

The potential for clash between these two worlds with two very different sets of rules is substantial, as are the implications for continuing and effective study. The challenge would be to harmonise.

## 5.4 Challenges for Mature students

Although I have noted that Student Experience literature has centred on the role of learner (Silver and Silver, 1997), this is less so in the case of Mature students where, from early studies, life context is acknowledged as significant. As Haselgrove (1994: 6) further noted for Mature students:

*“Mature students have ‘difficulties’ with HE because of the rest of their lives, financial emotional and personal, impinge on the only role in which the higher education sector is usually prepared to recognise them: as learners”.*

### 5.4.1 Family Concerns

The perception within the literature is demonstrated that women are still the primary care providers in the family within Scotland’s culture. Two examples are cited in support of this position: Peters (2000) and Cuthbertson *et al* (2004), the latter being particularly interesting since it involved a comparative study between Scotland and Australia. The usual constraints of finance and accommodation were examined in that study but it was significant that childcare and caring for elderly relatives was much more of a difficulty for the Scottish students than for the Australian ones. Cuthbertson interpreted this as indicating a retarded rate of growth of alternative care facilities within Scottish society. However, an alternative interpretation, I would suggest, is that the acceptance and growing expectation of women to return to work is establishing a societal shift, albeit slowly, which may account for some of the ambiguity on women’s part. Even with childcare facilities, the heavy pressure to stay at home and enjoy the bonding with a young child has seen a reluctance for women to return work if alternative financing allows.

### 5.4.2 Financial Challenges

The Scottish Parliament has been reluctant to back up its rhetoric of encouragement of Mature students to undertake a course in HE with financial support. The eligibility for student loans has been generally restricted to those under the age of 50 years. In addition, prior to the legislation of 2006, although the official categorisation of “Mature” began at the age of 21 years, the student had to wait

another 4 years to gain access to Mature student funding from the government agency (Students' Awards Agency for Scotland), eligibility beginning at aged 25 years. This, for many years, put aspirant Mature students in a "no-man's land" right from the start. The Age Discrimination legislation 2006, outlined in Chapter 1, has redressed this anomaly.

Where financial security is assumed, mainstreamed young student communities will have developed a culture of entertainment and social events based on money and this will exclude full participation to those not financially secure. To pin student attrition on obvious factors such as financial difficulties may be tidy, but it is also simplistic and shallow. The consequences of these difficulties can lead to participation barred on financial grounds but, if the literature is interpreted from one perspective, it seems to be saying that it is the act of not being able to join in which is significant, not so much the loss of finances itself. If the acceptable culture was one of being financially poor, a concept traditionally associated with student life from the 1960s to the 1990s, finances would not be an integration issue. However, the introduction of self-financing has created a split economic culture within universities and the class definitions may be clearer, discouraging free crossing of financial boundaries in real terms. Suggestions of subtle institutional action at timely intervals are found in the literature, such as the influence of the timing of bursaries, encouraging a policy of distribution at arrival point and thus facilitating integration as a consequence (Hatt *et al*, 2005a).

## **5.5 Interface with Academic systems**

Although academic systems necessarily uphold standards, the application of equal opportunity legislation necessitates the adoption of some flexibility within these standards. Increased disability is an unfortunate product of increased age and so flexibility of access becomes an issue. Mature students commuting from a distance may require flexible timetabling and virtual materials to enable distance learning. Childcare responsibilities require understanding from academic tutors used to focusing on mainstreamed students.

Each of these examples requires a setting of clear boundaries of what can be considered “reasonable adjustment” in terms of format, teaching access and assessments. This is an area of acute tension in all universities, but particularly in the Ancients with traditional systems, often inflexible because of the sheer length of time they have been in operation. Staff struggle with a changing personal identity as their role includes political judgement and performance dependent on the interpretation of the institutional duty owed to external partners (Whitchurch, 2004). The commitment on behalf of the teaching staff requires not only a response to presenting need, but anticipatory planning and foresight, a point highlighted by authors with pressing insistence (O’Connor and Robinson, 1999; Pinder, 2005). Teaching non-traditional students brings with it different pressures and an increased duty of care for staff. One example would be the recommended preference for group-work amongst non-traditional students (Kember, 1995; Greenan *et al* 1997). Rather than contradicting further evidence that the social integration is not so important (Duquette, 2000), this actually supports it, for the focus on this group socialisation is targeted on academic issues and within a teaching framework, the area highlighted as important for non-traditional students. However, although active group learning uses academic study as a route for students to interact, share their personalities and learn more about each other, a note of caution may be required. The lack of self-selection sees random students being placed together and the results can place particularly reserved students in an inhibited role, allowing dominance of others and a heavy reliance on the careful and sensitive handling of the mediating academic teacher to avoid uneven contribution of effort.

Read *et al* (2003) examined the interface of the student’s cultural expectations and the culture of the academic environment and found that the academic culture is neither uniformly accessed nor experienced by students. The student with involvement in extra curricular activities, lunchtime group sessions, and first name terms with lecturers, has a completely different experience to those who remain at a peripheral level, and sometimes in all categories of students, not necessarily by choice.

The financial implications to universities of ensuring inclusion of non-traditional students can be substantial. They can include increasing technological support, providing materials for teaching in alternative formats, adapting physical access to buildings, building nurseries and enlarging student support departments. Managing the terms of conditional government finances, however incongruent with internal values, has become a major challenge for the HE sector worldwide (Eustace, 1994; Dill, 1992). In terms of staffing, due to funding restrictions and reluctance to increase resources, academics operate under an increasingly stretched staff/student ratio. Additionally, staff support is essential with non-traditional students often requiring proportionally more attention in order to succeed in their studies and yet often the least likely to ask for help (Silver and Silver, 1997).

On the income side of the balance sheet, additional cash incentives are aimed specifically at the diverse market, and are offered to admissions departments to widen access to university. Summer schools for students with non-traditional qualifications offer short-term support, and limited funding for specific periods of time are offered by Funding Councils to part-compensate. However the institution has to carry the cost of ongoing support once in the university, often on a long-term basis. On-campus childcare facilities leased to private operators take the burden of health and safety, insurance and professional controls. However, this results in an example of the accountability to more agencies as described in Chapter 3 and puts senior managers in the position of steering change rather than determining it (Deem in Eggins, 2003: 65). To use Shinn's (1986) analogy once again, this is another piper who will have to be paid to play the tune.

## **5.6 Summary**

Although studying student experience has generated both a body of research, and some interesting projects examining particular groups of students, (for example, Christie *et al*, 2003) there remain some gaps in the literature within the wider context of the Mature student experience in universities in Scotland. The focus remains on academic performance and the students' roles as learners (e.g. Walker,

1999; 2000) but the overall experience, including social interactions, is now receiving attention (Tett, 2004).

The voice of non-traditional students must now be heard as their move into the mainstream of Higher Education is recognised. However, if monitoring and tracking these students is necessary in order to gauge success of programmes specifically designed to help them integrate and achieve their potential, the exercise becomes, essentially, a quantitative one. With this methodology, boundary definitions are required; a complex process when dealing with diversity. Objective “labels” have to be applied and, even where the government has opted out of labelling others, they then have to rely on data based on self-declaration, an inconsistent and volatile process. This has led me to consider a critical concept within this study, that of self categorisation of a developing identity. Within the criteria used to define us, there may be similarities with others, allowing a grouping to develop with those of a shared characteristic. However a major question emerging from the literature is whether or not Mature students share self-defining characteristics to the extent that they can be considered a homogeneous group. Being in an “Out group” can foster an alternative “In-Group” and it would be interesting to investigate if this has been the experience for the participants in this study.

The literature surrounding “Structure” and “Agency” offers another lens through which to view the experience in terms of whether the Mature student can control the outcome of the experience or their processes to that point. The debate links into consideration of the mainstreaming of diverse students as opposed to the provision of focused and targeted attention directed at them, for example, in Access courses.

The theoretical literature on identity has described the importance of the late-adolescent stage, but the reasoning behind this is shared with the features of a Mature student losing their familiar way of life and adopting a new role within a new environment. It is a life-changing process which demands adjusting or

reforming of the old identity. However, the commuting element of the Mature student life in an essentially residential university setting compounds the ambiguity of the two inescapable, everyday, roles of student and home, consequently raising anxiety.

Once a sense of identity has been established at the interaction point, this study will examine where the Mature students think that identity belongs. For example, how do Mature students categorise themselves, if at all? How important is integration to them, particularly in terms of academic and/or social perspectives? Is Duquette (2000) correct in the claim that non-traditional students do not rank social integration as a priority in their lives? How does their positioning of social integration impact on their understanding of their wider university experience?

The challenges to Mature student integration are highlighted in the existing literature in terms of family concerns, financial burdens, and lack of institutional resources; stressing that none of these, alone, are enough to lead to attrition. The academic interface has been examined with the acknowledgement that not everyone accesses the experience uniformly, but a recurring theme raises the notion that non-traditional students are called upon, and apparently willing to, make more sacrifices in their personal lives for the sake of their study.

The final chapter in this Part II reviews the literature which will assist in giving us some idea of previous research into measuring student experience. Concentrating on the period post student and university interaction, the retrospective view examines what studies have said about losses and gains, ranging from the extreme loss of attrition through to more abstract gains such as self-improvement for the individual.

## Chapter 6

### Reflections – The Value of the University Experience

#### *Reflections on the Interaction*

##### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter takes us to the centre of the research question: once the losses and gains are measured, on both an institutional and individual basis, what is the value of their university experience to the students involved? The harvest of these student experiences provides marketing intelligence on the received service or the other side of the partnership. Mature students have joined in the larger choir of non-traditional students, the vocalisation of whose experiences prove important, as Haselgrove (1994:6) notes:

*“these ‘marginal’ students have now moved into the mainstream where their voices can be less easily ignored”*

This chapter explores the areas of loss and gain as described in the literature by researchers studying from the perspective of both the Mature students and institutions. The original findings of the empirical research in this study, which are focused on the exploration of the value of the experience (Chapter 11), can be embedded within the theoretical frameworks uncovered in the literature reviewed in this chapter, but those of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 must also be considered.

A basic summary of the balance may look something like this:

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**Institutional**

<b><u>Loss</u></b>	<b><u>Gain</u></b>
Resource Impact (Chapter 5)	Funding Council Backing (Chapter 3)
Staff Impact (Chapter 5)	Social Acceptability of Inclusion (Chapter 3)
Student Attrition	Student Retention

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**Individual**

<b><u>Loss</u></b>	<b><u>Gain</u></b>
Academic Failure	Degree
Academic Stress	Academic Credits
Stability of Wages	Employment Opportunities (Chapter 4)
Finance	Finance Benefits (Chapter 4)
Personal Relationships	Social Status (Chapter 3)
Self-Confidence Loss	Self-Confidence Improvement

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The degree is the ultimate loss or gain for the student, but consideration of the attainment of academic credits can be viewed positively, even if ultimate retention is not achieved. Following on from the body of retention literature, employment and financial benefits of a course in HE emerge in another focus for research tracking non-traditional students in employment. Moreover, the symbolic interpretation of what a degree means to them is examined in terms of self-image, a more difficult area to tease out but, nevertheless, critical.

## 6.2 Institutional Retention and Attrition

### 6.2.1 Mainstreamed Literature

Kember (1995) and Paterson *et al* (1997) have concluded that retention should not be viewed as just the instrumental aim of universities but rather as the outcome of a good student experience and, likewise, that attrition is defined as an extreme result of a poor experience. Retention research has become an essential ingredient of the institutional mechanisms geared towards increasing the percentage of graduates and ensuring financial return for the institution on their prior investment of marketing, recruitment and estates. The Scottish Funding Council's calculation of the financial allocation to universities based on graduates rather than entrants reaffirms that retention is an important financial concern for the business of universities.

Caution is necessary when interpreting the data on students' withdrawal reasons; they are multi-faceted thus complicating the collection of exit data. Pressures, which may prove unbearable for one student, are well managed by another (Christie *et al*, 2004). Lots of interconnected pressures can build up an accumulative effect so that, at the point of withdrawal, the student will have difficulty identifying one single trigger. Self-definition to tick a bureaucratic box at a time of mixed emotion means the gathering of the data at that point is unlikely to be accurate or reflective of the student's situation.

However on overall attrition rates from HE, where data is available, two thirds of students who do withdraw do so in the first year, and almost certainly by the end of their second year (Christie *et al*, 2002). "Drop-out" rates are lower in the UK than most other developed countries but it has been recognised that data collected on student retention in the UK, a focus of the 1990s, was, until the turn of the century, of poor quality and often inaccurate (Hall, 2001). Students who withdraw may re-enter HE. However, statistics for this process have only been gathered by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) since 2002. When withdrawal is an effect of many, interconnected reasons, the combined effect responds better to a

qualitative approach to institutional data collection (an indicator that a qualitative approach will produce the sort of data I am looking for in my own study). The final “ticked box” in the institutional record of reasons for withdrawal will give neither accurate nor in-depth assistance in understanding what influences attrition. In trying to find methods to understand and influence retention, a number of core texts are worth highlighting: Walker (1999), Tinto (1975), Kember (1995), Pascarella (1985), and Pace (1984). Although I place focus on Tinto and Walker’s work, in particular Pascarella provided a generalised causal model including measures of institutional features as well as quality of effort, with Pace echoing this.

Walker examined three theoretical methods of charting retention: the students’ own identification of reasons; the predictive approach to student withdrawal using entry qualifications (but denying the importance of external factors), and Walker’s “philosophical” approach, an avoidance of attrition by full integration into both the academic and social life of institutions.

Other studies, paralleling Walker’s themes, highlighted an array of reasons for withdrawal including psycho-social reasons (feelings of fear, threats to their concept of self, lack of perceived control), interactionist reasons (a sense of alienation, perceived rejection by peers) and external constraints (guilt, pressure from family and friends, homesickness) (Parker and Asher, 1987; Hymel *et al*, 1996; Mackie, 2001; Waters and Gibson, 2001). Once again, these reasons all converge in the shared features of the student not feeling emotionally comfortable; feeling they do not “fit” or “belong”.

The core model seeking to understand the retention process originated in the United States with a piece of theoretical work by Tinto (1975) producing a “Theory of College Student Departure”. His framework suggested three key variables of persistence: background characteristics; integration into academia; and social integration. The psychosocial reasons mentioned earlier are included within these categories. In testing his theory, a number of researchers, while stressing the

importance of initial experiences in influencing student persistence (for example the model for student transition proposed by Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001), largely support and expand upon Tinto's model.

Kember (1995) creating a causal model of student progress, explicitly expanded Tinto's model by adding "academic incompatibility" which was defined as an inability to cope with study which developed from a clash of the teaching format and students' coherent set of beliefs about knowledge and teaching. However, Woodley *et al* (2001) challenged Kember's model, finding few of the causal relationships as achieving a statistical significance with robust foundations, although acknowledging this may have "*intuitive appeal*" (2001:131). Although positivist in approach, I found these two studies particularly interesting for their introduction of "academic incompatibility" which will be returned to later as a consideration in this thesis. However before attempting other relevancy for this study, I also noted that the Open University-type locus of the Kember study, with a unique system of progression and flexible learning may be difficult to replicate in an Ancient.

Linking integration with retention, Tinto and Walker's core models focused on traditional, adolescent students where a critical success factor was that of social integration. I found it necessary to go further into less well-known research to investigate the applicability of these themes to the non-traditional student.

### 6.2.2 Non-Traditional Student Literature

In a North American study outside of my study review dates of 2000 – 2007 delineated in Chapter 4 (and Appendix 4), Chartrand (1992) highlighted in an alternative model by Bean and Metzner (1985), a useful tool for assessing non-traditional students' adjustment to university. Bean and Metzner conceptualised integration and subsequent retention within the context of external family and friends offering support, juggling daily life tasks and responsibilities in family and employment terms. Once again adopting a positivist approach, six sets of variables

predicting early dropout were identified: Background, Study Habits, Environment, Academic Outcome, Psychological Outcome and Attitude. In parallel with themes in the work of Duquette (2000) their key assertion was that while social involvement in the university setting may well be critical for young students, it is simply not an option for students from a non-traditional background, juggling external lives. They removed, therefore, the social integration factor from Tinto's model, thus denying any significance for non-traditional students. However, this approach based the definition of "non-traditional" on an assumption that the external life component is strong and supportive, is not always true.

An English study worth considering, prior to the review period identified but worth highlighting, is that of Armstrong (1996) which pre-dated but would have fitted into, Walker's framework (1999) and noted a 15% attrition rate of Mature students. A current comparison for this would be the HESA statistical returns in the UK which, in 2004/5 recorded Mature student attrition at 13%. A useful comparison records the attrition rate for total students (all ages and definitive groups) at almost half that, at 7.2%. Armstrong and Walker both categorised attrition reasons in terms of a similar structure: lack of commitment to the course (psycho-social), higher work load than expected and wrong choice of course (interactionist), financial problems, and family concerns, poor or non-existent support (external constraints). Reasons for retention included enhanced senses of personal motivation, self-esteem, achievement and purpose (psych-social), positive working atmosphere (interactionist) and good supporting networks (lack of external constraints).

Reflecting Tinto's work in the United States, the theoretical and empirical work surrounding retention within the UK (usually using a positivist approach) is sourced in the work of Yorke (1998, 1999, 2000, 2004) who has, in particular, given much attention to non-traditional students from low socio-economic groups (2003). Other UK retention studies have linked student attrition with practical difficulties and increased family commitments (for example, term time working [Metcalf, 2003])

and financial problems [James, 2001]). Calls for targeted support for students in the UK with no previous tradition of HE within their family background have been frequent (for example, Bamber and Tett, 2001; Gallacher, 2006; Griffiths *et al*, 2005).

Recent focus in Scotland has turned to the transition period for those entering HE, often from Further Education (FE) Colleges, taking the perspective of students who have withdrawn and using quantitative and retrospective data to explore the stories behind the statistics. Bennett *et al*, (2007) explored attrition at four new universities in disadvantaged areas in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The study supported the attrition timing in the first year of university engagement consistent throughout earlier studies (Yorke, 1997; Thomas, 2002) and included additional contributory factors such as inflexible lifelong learning systems and inability to access support systems.

However, a useful point identified by Bennett *et al* was the tendency of the media to portray withdrawal as “working class failure”, finding this to be an inappropriate labelling, as participants claimed an overall benefit of acquired skills, confidence and life experience from their time at university, even if the ultimate degree target had not been reached. This finding not measured on a quantitative basis or through government statistics, highlights the limitations of the quantitative approach of retention studies. Registry departments count the numbers of students in and out; a crude measurement. However, focusing on qualitative data relies upon a clear definition of categories with accurate and consistent application thereafter. This diversity classification has already been noted as a complex procedure demanding cautious measurement and awareness of researchers’ interpretation bias (Ashby, 2004). The method also falls short of exploring reasons in depth behind the decision to withdraw from a course, while the possibility of personal gain resulting from even an incomplete course is considered less.

Interestingly, Tinto's core text failed to address the challenge that the recent HE expansion may see some students having difficulty with the intellectual rigour or the academic challenge of an HE environment. Much of the literature attributing withdrawal to students finding themselves in the wrong location or doing the wrong course assumes that everyone who arrives at university has, fundamentally, the intellectual ability to be there. The once firm criteria for admissions set on academic attainments are now being questioned as institutions are pressurised into considering making selection assessments based on academic "potential". The possibility of miscalculated recruitment by universities, currently finding themselves in competition to fill places, cannot be discounted. One marked difference between the traditional and non-traditional literature is the lack of academic incompatibility as a reason for attrition in the non-traditional literature. On the contrary, in one Scottish study of undergraduate withdrawal, Christie & Grant (2004) found students generally believing the work to be well within their academic capabilities, although the authors acknowledged that there may have been some under-reporting of academic problems having been considered in the withdrawal decision. To justify the definition of incompatibility the complex reasoning has to first seek solutions and mitigating circumstances, for example, limited previous educational opportunities, lack of training, and social barriers. The basis of incompatibility lies firmly on a level playing field comparing to others who have experienced similar opportunities.

### **6.3 Academic Achievements**

Focus on the relationship between diversity and learning outcomes is necessarily driven in a quantitative format (to fit with academic performance marks) and consistent with the HE sector's preoccupation with the fear of wider access necessitating a diminution of academic standards (Wagner, 1995). Demographic variables of performance include disability (Richardson, 2001), gender, (Young and Fisler, 2000; Houston and Rimmer, 2005) and black minority ethnic status (McManus *et al.*, 1996); psychosocial influences such as cultural background, (Bossy, 2000), entering from a general non-traditional background (Cantwell *et al.*,

2001), combining part-time work (Curtis and Shani, 2002; Manthei and Gilmore, 2005) and receiving financial bursaries from the institution (Hatt *et al*, 2005b), along with cognitive influences such as unrealistic expectations prior to entry (Lowe and Cook, 2004).

The risk of external and demographic factors influencing academic performance has been linked into the audit process for institutions which has, perhaps predictably, seen an increase in, once again, positivist research interest in this area. Past student studies have examined the influence of independent factors on the success or failure of degree attainment. Examples of factors have included: mental health issues (Robotham and Julian, 2006), part-time employment (Carney *et al*, 2005a; Humphrey, 2006), financial bursary support (Hatt *et al*, 2005a; Hatt *et al*, 2005b), finance difficulties, (Bennett, 2003), political activity (Appleton, 1987), the physical environmental conditions linking with Maslow (1943) (Prescott & Simpson, 2004,) being a “student mother” (Pinilla and Munoz, 2005) and loneliness (Redwood, 1995). Although interest in their daily lives has become a recent focus of research, currently focus still remains more on the academic interface than on the student life accompanying it (Silver and Silver, 1997; Smith, 2004).

Relating to their role as learners, research into the relationship between students’ age and academic performance found Mature students to achieve high performance levels (Yorke, 1998). Reasons for this could link with an identified high level of determination (Bamber, 2007), increased levels of focus (Lumb & Vail, 2004) and motivation (Archer *et al*, 1999) but the causal leap is inferential. Comparing a broader sample of traditional and non-traditional students, Cantwell *et al* (2001) found that, generally, non-traditional students performed marginally worse, with the exception of Mature students, whose performance was better.

However, prior to Cantwell, some studies would reject his claim. Osborne *et al* (1997), for example, found the performance of Mature students to be broadly similar to that of mainstreamed students, regardless of their entry route to

university. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) explained that away by claiming that the apparent increase in focus claimed in Yorke's 1998 study was offset by the personal burdens carried by individuals which detracted from their studies, balancing the results. Worse than that, one group of Access students studying Mathematics and Science actually performed slightly worse than traditional students. However, supporting Ozga and Sukhnandan's balancing of burdens, Griffiths *et al*, (2005) mitigated the evidence of underperformance by highlighting learner shock on return to study.

Nevertheless, overall, in spite of the extra factors which have been considered for non-traditional students, the pattern of students in the mature classification, once retained, is that of maintaining high commitment and performing well. Unsurprisingly, Woodfield *et al* (2006) found that students who attended more classes performed better academically while Hatt *et al* (2005) found that students with bursaries performed better academically than non-bursaried students.

Given my previous comments on the social constructionist choice for this thesis it will not be surprising that I have found quantitative methods in this area of research unsatisfactory. The measured outcome is in terms of degree percentage marks, making this, like retention studies, a quantitative process. However, the complex and multi-faceted issues faced by these students cannot and have not been fully understood by standard quantitative studies thus leading to inconclusive or contradictory findings. (This methodological challenge will be explored more in Chapter 8).

If academic "success" were to be measured by students themselves, it would be important to identify their self-determined targets. While some students aim to complete all assignments at minimum levels, others have a desire to excel. For some, simply undertaking a course detached from the direct influence of family, the knowledge gained with each semester and subject, or the time to think independently, is an achievement. For others the degree attendance is only a means

to a higher paid job. Lumb & Vail (2004) suggest that the academic standards of Mature students may be higher than those of the young, mainstreamed students.

As a counter-balance to the raised performance of non-traditional students, their retention rates are lower than traditional students, as indicated earlier in this chapter. It would appear that, while Mature students are more likely to leave, when they stay they perform well. This was certainly found with Access courses, which, set up originally to assist with student retention, were found, in fact, not to enhance retention although those retained did perform better academically (Walker, 2000). If institutions wish to capitalise upon Mature student participation (and policies appear to indicate that this is the case) then the focus of support and retention of Mature students is vital. The empirical data may shed some light on this, and may even offer some outlined influences in this process.

#### **6.4 Financial Loss or Gain?**

The encouragement of people to engage with the lifelong learning theme nevertheless places a duty on individuals to take responsibility for self-development of their intellectual potential with the promise that they could “change their lives” (Fryer, 1997). This duty to respond has undertones of right; moral expectations to “be all you can be”. It also demands that those responsible for the delivery of such programmes provide accompanying support. Clothed in caring speech with undertones of a paternalistic government (Universities-Scotland, 2002b), the message nevertheless disguises the selling of an industry supplying employment market needs.

Where an improvement in employment status is an expectation of participation in HE, and if there is to be a measure in terms of gain, then the diversification of the student profile has to be matched by a similar move on the part of employers to promote willingness to employ non-traditional graduates (following on from the reasonable adjustments already demanded from the universities as discussed in Chapter 4). Employer ageism has, however, been documented as rife (DfEE, 1997

in Kirkton and Greene, 2005:105). A contemporary, positivist, study undertaken by Purcell *et al* (2007) supports original findings (from the mid 1990s) which analysed graduates entering the labour market. Purcell found Mature students have a more difficult time finding appropriate employment than traditional graduates or those from other diverse backgrounds. Sennett (2006) reminds us that hiring a Mature graduate will involve a greater investment by the management; younger graduates are more likely to have the freedom of life circumstances and so will move on. Therefore the commitment of “trying them out” is a safer bet for an employer. However, given the geographical responsibilities (childcare, financial investment in housing etc.) the roots of Mature students will be less free to move. If a Mature graduate is awkward, challenges authority, is less likely to be malleable in terms of managing, the employer may find it difficult to terminate their contract or persuade them to move on (Sennett, 2006).

Prior to the Post-1992 university expansion, many young people entered apprenticeships and skills development courses directly related to craft training. Post-1992, however, an increasing number of these are entering universities and undertaking courses which will leave them less specifically trained for particular employment, but with widely expanded aspirations and expectations for their employment prospects. Employers face higher numbers of people now equipped with degrees in the liberal arts (Social Anthropology, Psychology, Film and Media studies), where in the past, by aged 21 years, they would have been trained in, for example, electrical and joinery work. This has led to accusations of Scotland producing too many graduates with the wrong sorts of capabilities for Scottish business:

*“The UK is producing too many graduates and the demand for “knowledge workers” has been severely overestimated, leading academics have claimed.” (The Independent, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2004).*

*“More than half of employers believe that the UK is producing too many graduates and that the rise in student numbers has led to a dumbing down of standards.” (Association of Graduate Recruiters’ Survey, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2004)*

However, Futureskills Scotland (research commissioned jointly by Scottish Enterprise and the Highlands and Islands Enterprise) disputes the public doubt. In their 2006 report they demonstrated clear support for the government agenda. This study related five indicators of labour of those in market performance (working, registered unemployed, graduate trainees, temporarily employed and working part-time) and the graduate wage premium. Clear evidence was found of the demand of graduates having kept pace with the supply of graduates in all five categories. The last category, the graduate wage premium started to decline in England since 1995. However, even in this category the Scottish finding was positive with maintenance of the rate over that time period (Futureskills Scotland, 2006).

At first glance this would seem to be excellent news. However, some areas were not addressed by the report, namely the rate of return of the study experience to the individual both in terms of monetary cost and of value-added life experience (Futureskills Scotland, 2006). Some companies have recently adopted a company policy of employing people past retirement age (for example, B & Q). However these are new initiatives highlighting the value of life experience available in these people and so, on those terms, they are a different type of qualified older person from those who are recent graduates in subjects relatively new to them.

For Mature students, the study choice is important. If expected to equip them with appropriate qualifications for employment, a system of personal academic advising at the application, entrant and re-advising stages is crucial. Being able to recoup the financial cost of the study programme requires careful subject and career advising, especially given some geographically static restrictions. This is still feasible in an institution focused on creating thinkers and not on vocational courses but it is imperative that Ancients recognise that a clash of purposes is central to the tension between unemployed graduates and institutions.

The personal investment of the student is significant enough for the status of customer to be very real, whether or not this is readily accepted or consciously acknowledged by the academic community. The majority of individual student funding is currently through a student loan scheme, which carries long-term implications for the individuals. The inability of many students to gain work that is acceptable to their aspirations once they have a degree, regardless of their capability to do such work or, in the case of Mature students, the willingness of employers to employ them regardless of directive legislation, often results in loans not being repaid and in the opposite of Sennett's "usefulness" (2006). This situation leads us to potentially greater, though to some extent hidden, costs to society and our HE system, not to mention the psychological costs to the students themselves. It also leaves the retrospective evaluation of the experience by recent graduates struggling to find work often tainted in negativity.

In 2005 the first doubts to the financial benefits of a university degree were cast in the press (Schofield, 2005) when studies estimated graduates' lifetime earnings at just £140,000 over those without a degree. This varied in accordance with the vocational aspect of the degree, with liberal arts degrees benefits dropping to as low as £22,000. This was a considerable difference over figures produced 20 years earlier but was reinforced recently with similar figures of an average £160,000 and as low as £1,000 for Arts degrees (Henry, 2007). Naylor *et al* (2002), taking the equation between degree and financial return further, links greater reward with degrees from higher league table universities and actually calculates the percentage increase for higher classifications of degree (first class 12% over third class).

Mature students clearly tend to have fewer years of earnings to recoup the cost of study so the equation is much less secure for them. If the financial and employment benefits are so insecure, other gains have to be investigated. Why else would someone go to university, given the circumstances discussed above?

## 6.5 The Development of “Self”

In the last chapter, the concept of identity was explored; the ways in which we become more cognisant of who or what we are and how we reform that when coming into new situations. I now take the reflective view, considering what has happened to that identity at the end of the process and how it can be measured. Are there individual gains to be made through less quantifiable products than financial income, or employment status, but nevertheless accounted or recognisable?

In the accounts from the literature there may have been a temptation for a justifying mantra to be repeated by people who had invested so much in this process. The subjective stance can demand objective confirmation, although this may be the very core of the role which a degree fills. The bit of paper confirms a credible level of intellectual achievement (especially conferred by a university with reliable status for making these sorts of judgements). In the process of getting that bit of paper, other documents will have been produced; essays, examination scripts. These add up to a portfolio of work, which can assist in functionally quantifying and, to some extent inferring, an identity now held by the graduate – or perceived as such by others. The thinking borrows much from Hegel’s claim (Nisbet, 1975) that to know ourselves we should not sit and think what we are, but we should produce something, objectively examine it and see something of ourselves in it. HE can provide the opportunity for self-assessment to take place by the act of producing evidence of intellect, effecting a self-assessment of being now “educated” and of this providing a “superiority” (Carney & McNeish, 2005), although this may be a situation changing in a society with mass HE at its core. In identity labels, the new-found stance of “graduate”, a public and social definition was said, in 1972, to include:

*“job prospects, income potential, access to political and civil service positions, marital prospects, and other opportunities” (Meyer, 1972:110).*

If this is no longer unilaterally applicable, we have to look deeper for benefits, through self-knowledge, definition, and, ultimately, measured assessment of “self”.

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, British philosophers and psychologists altered their approach to self-assessment. With Freud's introduction of "the unconscious mind" (Freud, 1901) the process no longer was accepted to be simple, conclusive and offering official insight but took on a protracted, complex profile, with no guarantee that it would even be successful or conclusive at the end. It was a necessarily personal, lengthy process, since the measurement of improvement in the definition of "self" requires first the personally established target of "good". The sourcing of that target was necessarily individual, but could be in humanist or religious, moral, values or in Nietzsche's view, could be collectively explained as a societal target created from a historic tradition of the weak rebelling against the values of the powerful (Kaufmann & Hollingdale, 1968: 10 – 22).

To take but one example of the complexity, a student may improve their self-image (Britton & Baxter, 1999), by social, emotional and cultural stimulation, (Tam, 2002), or by moving social class, defined by their closer acquaintance with a network of people from a socially acknowledged higher class at the end of their HE. Being "closer" infers association with an "In-Group" but in order to have fully joined that "In-Group" by the end of the experience, and to self-assess as having used HE as a social mobility tool, takes us down the route of questioning the agreed societal criteria for class definition in the first place: What makes a person of a "higher class"?

One government performance indicator of the wider access initiative collates data categorising the social class of students, historically derived from their application forms declaring a parental occupation in accordance with the Registrar General's Social Classes (see Chapter 3). In terms of "shaping" society, it is argued (Scott, 1995), that one of the characteristics of post-industrial society is that this method of identifying a person's place in the class system is outdated and irrelevant, especially when considering the now transient and global nature of the employment market and the rapid growth of new specialist occupations. Scott claims that self-determination of status is more feasible since the 1980s with criteria, which can

include attributes such as level of educational achievements and cultural orientation. All of this would seem to oppose the findings of Goldthorpe *et al* (1969) (Chapter 4) but then one has to remember that the “Affluent Worker” study reflects a society of almost 40 years ago, a time when the equal opportunity tide had not gained momentum. A call for a new classification has been put to the Economic and Social Research Council for the next UK census in 2011. By that point, new legislation currently in the process of implementation is expected to have increased the agenda even further. Scott (1995:107) goes even further to include potential criteria for social classification of the future; broader socio-cultural attributes, for example, “designer” labelled high fashion clothes, expensive cars, niche market jewellery could be used as indicators. Taking Scott’s perspective, universities in the UK could be used as a tool by individuals to place themselves in an emerging social hierarchy, ultimately leading to an equalling or fragmentation of parts of society and, reflecting a matching institutional use to that of governments suggested by Foucault (1973). Implications arise from this, for, if self-determination is becoming a driver in society’s structure, equality of access to that opportunity and equality of encouragement to individuals to use this mechanism becomes more defensible. With no reasonable expectation of financial benefits, without transparency of purpose and promotion of (and investment in) other non-financial reward prior to engagement, then encouragement of substantial individual investment is, I would suggest, indefensible.

One aspect of the identification would appear to be confirmed in that the student has remained at the institution. To do so they have demonstrated their allegiance to the ethos of HE according to Christie and Munro (2003), although it could be emotional or financial pressures that, rather, dissuade from withdrawal. Either way, by remaining there they have remained committed throughout study with repeated financial investment each year. The conviction of personal relevance would appear to be critical with Mature students (Osborne *et al*, 2001; Osborne *et al*, 2003) although it would be useful to track the process of this relevance throughout the institutional engagement. It is important to note recent research which emphasises

that feelings of loss and dislocation are inherent to non-traditional students entering an “elite” university (Christie, *et al*, 2007). So retention is not enough, for students can be placed on the periphery, what I would describe as, *walking wounded*; completing (the graduation box ticked) with unfulfilled academic potential and a poor experience. The question would then be whether or not the identification with the process of learning, and the belief in it as a crucial core to life, is a practical gain for students. Following on from this, what does the university have a responsibility to do to make full engagement available? Are these Mature students nominally matriculated, or are they fully engaged in a learning community with all the benefits that brings?

## **6.6 Summary**

Retention could be viewed as the ultimate outcome of a good student experience. However, if non-economic values to engaging with the HE process are to be given any recognition, then we have to consider that perhaps academic credit in any small way is a valuable asset. This, of course, will have to be balanced with the financial and personal investment paid out in a proportionate format.

The retention literature is a significant body driven by the financial implications to institutions of losing a student. Research has become an essential tool in this context, but it is a quantitative exercise in the main, counting people in and out, and, I would argue, would benefit from more qualitative searching of the influences behind the demographic patterns, for, although reasons are counted, it is likely to be the case that their effect differs between individuals.

It may be that there is a culture of completion in some universities making it more socially acceptable to struggle on and less easy to “drop out”. However, when withdrawal does occur, there is agreement between researchers that usually there will be no one reason identified, with the triggers often being multiple and complex. Reasons have been split in the literature into three broad categories these being

labelled psychosocial, interactionist, and externally constrained (Parker and Asher, 1987; Hymel *et al*, 1996; Mackie, 2001; Waters and Gibson, 2001).

The evidence of Kember's "academic incompatibility" (1995) as a trigger is scant; but there are particular political dangers in this being levied at non-traditional students, given the caution of unequal educational background experiences.

The central focus of this chapter, and crucial to the whole study, is the identification of the value of a university education which can be gained as a result of a degree programme. While some evidence has been offered to suggest that the employment and financial benefits of a degree are less than sure and may be decreasing, there is growing evidence to balance that showing what is really on offer is an acquisition of skills, confidence, life experience, social networking, and an improved self-evaluation. All of this is, of course, dependent on the expectations at the point of entry. Critical to this debate is the question as to the access of Mature students to the whole learning community, or are they nominally matriculated and graduate with a poor, peripheral, experience in between?

The review of the literature in part II in combination with that of Part I has provided a review of Mature student studies within the overall context of universities and organisational theory literature. Turning to Part III, the themes emerging from those reviews will be drawn together to identify questions that demand further attention.

## **PART III – THE TOOLS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

### **Chapter 7**

#### **Key Themes Emerging from the Literature**

##### **7.1 Introduction**

I begin by returning to the original research question:

*“What theoretical and policy lessons can be learned from a qualitative study of the Mature Student experience in an Ancient University?”*

Having recognised the spread of different bodies of literature established around the interactive process which this question covers, in this chapter I will draw together the threads of findings, discussion, and conjecture. In each area of focus highlighted in the previous literature review chapters, I outline the critical discussion, summarising as much of it as possible in one question which is at the core of the debate in that area but which also can be linked to the main research question. These core questions will be carried forward to the next Part IV, where the new, empirical, data from my own study will be discussed, searching for responses to the questions raised here.

##### **7.2 Purpose *versus* Expectations (relating to Chapter 4)**

###### **7.2.1 Purpose:**

The interpretation of the experience by the students themselves depends heavily on their expectations of what the University is meant to be providing. The literature on University purpose ranged from the obvious teaching and research, through contentious knowledge transfer to arguments on the use of a University to create either “a collective good” or, more specifically, “a good person”. Throughout the discussion, themes of the “interdependency” of the functions were noted while a difference between the vocationalism and the employability agenda of the

institutions was underlined. The critical question, in the purpose debate which is relevant to my study, has therefore been outlined as:

*“Is there a common vision of University purpose amongst the study participants or a recognisable pattern of clusters reflecting distinct purposes for groups of participants sharing particular characteristics?”*

### 7.2.2 Individual Motivation and Expectations

Identified within the literature were various expectations of Mature students embarking on a course of HE study. They had expectations of their gains at the end of the process, but also of the format of delivery on the way there. Expectations included those of the local environment, given the university’s geographical and rural location, with its student profile and public image. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Ancient aspect of the institution offered a distinctive culture, presenting challenges of a different nature than those of a modern institution, including an ethos of elitism. In terms of their “mature” status, the students may expect a particular delivery of service, but they also have expectations of themselves; their academic ability, the sacrifices demanded in terms of time, finances, family relationships.

With relation to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1992) and other studies of institutional relevance (for example, Archer, 2003) the Ancient institution has offered an environment with which the Mature students have chosen to engage, developing an identity in line with that. The influences on their decision-making process need exploration for, if the participants’ purpose is employment-related, it is inferred that they are not only *persuaded*, but, are ultimately *convinced*, that their lives will be “better”, a term which demands definition. Delineation might be in terms of enhanced employability, increased financial reward, higher social status or, perhaps, simply a preferred lifestyle branded by a particular Ancient trademark.

In terms of investment worth, if the purpose is not employment related, there has to be a suggestion from somewhere that gaining a degree from an ancient university carries gains of some other description. From the literature, two categories of information sources seemed likely:

- Public: media, university advertising or league tables
- Private: From friends or family, although pressure from their previous environment may not be necessarily positive towards HE.

Sennett's (2006) concept of "usefulness" emerged as work of particular interest to Mature students (both applying to HE and using their graduate status at the other end) while the view of Blaxter and Tight (1993) reminded us that Mature students should not be assumed to be a homogeneous group.

The key question from this area of focus was summarised as follows:

*"Can different sub-groups of staff and students articulate what expectations they have of each other, including what benefits they expect the other to deliver, and in what format?"*

### 7.2.3 Political and Philosophical Tensions

These may be tangibly experienced by Mature students, encountered at departmental level, within the university-wide management or, wider still, through the government HE strategy. The many tensions were grouped into four broad classifications:

#### *Standards versus Expansion*

The participants in my study, both staff and students may have views on the "Gold Standard" (Eustace, 1991), examining whether it is still relevant or whether a particular institutional label can differentiate between degrees in the same subject and of the same classification. It could be that the pressure to diversify is threatening to break the very strength at the core of the system with a lack of clarity

surrounding what is meant by “reasonable” adjustments striking at the core purpose of an institution and its cultural beliefs held up (see Chapter 3) in terms of academic credibility.

#### *Collegiality versus Managerial*

Participants may agree on the identity of current stakeholders in an ancient university, but the level of influence each has on setting the agenda, or level of standards within the institution, will vary. Tensions between Academic Freedom and management control could be acknowledged by the student participants and, if they are, these service users may have a clear idea of which approach they prefer; the traditional culture or the managerial, structured approach.

#### *Exclusivity versus Inclusion*

The diversity agenda has been designed within political circles without recent monitoring on whether it is being received well by those at whom it is directed. It would be interesting to know if student participants actually thought the diversity agenda could benefit them, in principal, but is only paid lip-service to on a practical basis within the service delivery in the institution. In terms of the staff, the university’s mission and purpose dictate how much the institution can benefit from offering educational services to Mature students.

#### *Knowledge versus Skills Training*

My study’s participants, staff and students, will have a view on the government determination to increase the accountability of universities and to delegate responsibility for application of knowledge. On an individual basis the students may use their governance to encourage the university towards the increased incorporation of an experiential emphasis on teaching.

A key theme emerges from these debates and focuses on a principal question, suggested as follows:

*“In understanding Ancients’ context, how do participants understand the political agenda facing universities today and how does this affect their expectation of how they will be received?”*

### **7.3 Bonding (relating to Chapter 5)**

#### 7.3.1 Developing Identity

If we accept that three of the defining emotions experienced at adolescence are connected to the development of identity (anxiety, role ambiguity, unfamiliar intellectual challenges), then the experiences of Mature students shortly after admission to a university run parallel. Most Mature students are likely to experience, and will be able to identify, initial role confusion in the early days, but if the institution is to design systems to minimise conflict for the new arrivals then it is important for the systems to allow articulation of and facilitate resolution of this confusion. Indeed, pre-existing structures within the institution may inhibit agency, although with effort these could be transferred into an enabling culture.

In this study, theoretical attention has had to go to the membership criteria and process of establishing an “In-Group” with which the Mature students may, or may not, choose to engage. The staff participants and mainstreamed students may place Mature students in a particular position but it is important not to forget the agency of that positioning. Overall, the focus for this area is suggested as:

*“How does the Mature student identity start to develop and how much agency is experienced during this process?”*

#### 7.3.2 Integration

An important area of debate rests around the claim of Duquette (2000) that while social integration is important for the academic performance or ultimate retention of mainstreamed students, this is not true for non-traditional students. Institutional responsibility has been progressing in the direction of social integration over a number of years to the current increase of university orientation programmes at the start of study. This has also resulted in some universities providing specialist academic, and social, streams for Mature students. This offers the focused attention

on these students, one which, consistent with elements of the Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1949), may well be attention they would enjoy.

The critical timing for integration has been identified as the first few weeks (Simons *et al*, 1988) and the student participants should be questioned on why this is. Given that it could be a less intensive, more dilute, experience for a Mature student going home each night, it may take longer for them to immerse themselves in the culture or to harmonise the two aspects of their lives.

Opportunities for social integration are considered an institutional priority in these early weeks, working on the assumption that integration facilitates general student performance and retention. However, in Mature student terms, there is little to support this. Evidence of Mature students' yearning for socialising at their "place of work" has not been sought. It may be that an unsupported presumption of common experiences and shared understandings with other Mature students (Blaxter & Tight, 1993) (never mind the need to bond with mainstreamed students), leaves student participants less concerned about socialising than mainstreamed students.

Therefore, the critical area of questioning on the relevancy of social integration has been summarised as:

*"Do Mature students prioritise mainstream networking opportunities as important for a better experience, or do they place themselves, through choice, as peripheral to the mainstreamed social life?"*

### 7.3.3 "Fit" – Identifying Peers

With reference to the Fit Studies (Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987) institutional representatives, outward-facing, may be able to open out the recruitment mission, working towards the gathering of a diverse student population. They may have created a melting pot of creative thinking and intellectual stimulation in the pursuit of knowledge. However, they also may have encouraged the repetition of "more of

the same”; inviting in, and attracting, people with shared characteristics. With reference to the key question, it is important to give a background context to the attitudes of the others in the institution, viewing the Mature students as central, or peripheral, to the mainstreamed community.

However, the student participants may create another group of their own under the broad classification of “Mature”. The focus of the questioning in this area is therefore:

*“Even if the Mature students are of different ages, are there common characteristics which infer that “Fit” has been established and that a peer group has been found?”*

#### 7.3.4 Discourses

It would seem reasonable to expect that Mature students, commuting from home to an Ancient on a daily basis, will have disjointed discourses alternating between the two environments. The effect of this discourse clash on the participants’ lives is substantial. The student participants may have to acquire one discourse, but with a proportional loss of the other. Examination of the harmonisation techniques will offer insight to the process.

Within this large area of exploration the key question emerges:

*“In what ways do the alternating discourses contribute to the Mature students’ experience?”*

#### 7.3.5 Challenges

This section raises questions about the preparedness of institutions prior to the admission of students with particular needs. Policy changes have been identified in some of the literature highlighting areas where facilitation of the experience can be designed. However, specific challenges are likely to be met within the distinct setting of an Ancient university in a rural area. Lack of preparedness to minimise

these challenges can lead to the perception of a poor experience by both staff and students.

*“What do the Mature students identify as the greatest challenges to a successful experience either in the university or home environment, and how could service provision be altered to ease them?”*

#### 7.3.6 The Interface with Academic Systems

As another aspect of the beneficial experience, preference for small group teaching has been expressed consistently by non-traditional students in general and Mature students in particular (Kember, 1995). However group teaching could be used as an academic or a social integration tool. Having given some focus on the importance of social integration (in 7.3.2) the attention now turns to the benefits of the overall academic experience and recognises the particular personal and family responsibilities of Mature students which may limit that experience.

*“Given the personal responsibilities and distracting commitments, is the academic experience uniformly accessed by Mature students?”*

### 7.4 Reflections (*relating to Chapter 6*)

#### 7.4.1 Retention/Attrition threats

Returning to the debate on the prioritisation of social integration to non-traditional students, this study does not include students who have left the HE system. However, those retained can be investigated to explore with them the periods of uncertainty during their experience and compare these with the categories of pressures identified within the retention literature, (Tinto, 1975; Walker, 1999; Pascarella, 1985; Pace, 1984). In addition, the key time frame focus of the retention literature is the first year withdrawal (Yorke, 1997).

The participants in my study have succeeded in being retained, so far. However, it is possible if not likely that some must have had doubts, at some point, about their decision to take a course of study and exploration of their reasons to stay will give the instrumental angle on the same query. If the literature has been concerned on

why students leave, this study will examine why they stay, especially given the ancient culture of the environment. A qualitative methodology may offer some richness of data and examine the complexities behind these decisions.

*“What helps Mature students to identify and overcome barriers and do staff realise ways in which they can assist in this?”*

#### 7.4.2 Academic Achievements

The process of gaining academic achievements necessitates sacrifices on the part of the Mature students and the designing of strategies to enable study focus while juggling external responsibilities and time pressures on their time. Sometimes the institution may be tempted to make assumptions on behalf of Mature students (with caution by Fallows and Symon [1999]) but, in order for evidence-based provisions to be made, identifiable consultation processes require embedding within the systems.

Academic guidance must play a role in managing expectations and realising targets, both prior to entrance (necessitating outreach work) and throughout course and module changes. Within this study, however, patterns of student expectations of academic capability can be identified:

*“Do Mature students themselves sense that they aim higher academically than their mainstreamed peers and, if this is so, how do they account for it?”*

#### 7.4.3 Loss or Gain?

Mature students may view the HE experience as investment providing a lucrative return in the long term, or at least measured as “cost-neutral”, the gains balancing the personal sacrifices. This view is not exclusive to Mature students. However the evidence in the literature does indicate that the benefits for Mature students may be less (Purcell *et al*, 2007).

It would seem to be critical for Mature students to differentiate between the concepts of “employability” and “vocationalism”. However, if the concept of “employability” is to be central to the value of a university programme, a shared understanding between students, staff, and graduate employers would seem necessary. The understanding has to be adapted or defined to sit within the Ancient’s liberal arts and pure science curriculum and purpose as part of the new setting of the expanded HE sector.

*“In terms of financial profit and loss, how do the Mature students rate their chances of realising a financial return on their investment?”*

#### 7.4.4 Development of “Self”

The term “Mature” symbolises different things to different people. In addition to the “absolute” of age, it covers norms, behaviour, values, challenges, discourses and perceptions (in spite of the warning that “self-definition” is not necessarily assumed and fixed [Roberts, 1996]). To some it represents wisdom, to others becoming old and infirm. Many Mature students have a background which does not include tertiary education, so, critical to the Mature students’ perspective, is a review of a student’s changing self-image as their participation in the HE course progresses.

Self-development touches on all aspects of the psyche. To take but one, academic experienced admissions officers may suspect ability, but, then again, it may not correlate with the evidenced prior qualifications of the student prior to arrival. After a period of study, the academic ability may look different. The self contains the capacity for change, realised by interaction with the environment (Mercer, 2007) and so the immersion within the academic environment cannot help but effect a prioritisation of academic goals and achievement. In reference to Sennett’s (2006) concept of “usefulness”, it would seem advisable to assess potential conflicts (external and internal), especially in relation to a student’s chosen course of study.

If nothing else, this study gives the opportunity for some Mature students at a point in their academic study to self-reflect<sup>26</sup>; what has the experience given them or taken away from them in terms of self-confidence, self-actualisation? It is worth examining the importance of certification at the conclusion accompanied by the trimmings of a traditional graduation ceremony. If leaving the course half way through makes the whole experience worthless, then the commitment of engagement at the beginning, alongside the financial investment and the lack of guarantee of payback, starts to take on frightening proportions.

So, fundamentally at the core of this study and, finally, relating critically to the overall study question:

*“In terms of psychological losses and gains, how do Mature students rate these?”*

## **7.5 Summary**

To remind again of the overall research question.....:

*“What theoretical and policy lessons can be learned from a qualitative study of the Mature Student experience in an Ancient University?”*

...initially has led me to look for the broad environmental literature covering the contexts of organisational theory and the history of universities. The literature surrounding the three phases of interaction between the Mature student and the university raised thirteen areas of debate which have been consolidated into thirteen further questions these being explored through analysis of my data. This process took me to the next stage.

I now faced the dilemma of how to find a methodological tool that offered a helpful way of addressing all these questions. It was vital that the questions, symbolising

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<sup>26</sup> The danger exists that such reflections may have negative results, carrying significant responsibility for me to deal with the resultant emotions. I shall discuss how I address this in the next chapter exploring my methods.

and encapsulating a wider theme and area of debate, should be “explored” and not just skimmed over and answered simplistically. Possible explanations were to be harvested, collated, and analysed, patterns identified and the results organised into a format offering clear insight to the experience of these students facilitating my contributing to theory, policy, and knowledge in the process.

The methodological exploration and method selection proved to be extensive, and an appropriate solution was elusive for some time.

## Chapter 8

### Methodology and Method

#### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores issues of methodology as pertinent to my study and the methods subsequently used, in particular explaining congruence with my ontological beliefs which surrounded the need for participants to have their voice heard, without my bias. I therefore had to aim to adhere to their words, within their perceived context. I realised that my study could be no more than a snapshot, for the perceptions of the participants in my study would hold stability within a short timeframe only. The organic, flowing influence of their encounters with their world would change what they interpreted very quickly. Generalisability would be limited.

For my own part, I wanted to *understand*, not just narrate a collection of anecdotes or list ambiguous “facts”. When examining the opinions of humans which change from day to day, there are no hard facts, only individual perceptions. I also came from a perspective where I believed that people, while having undoubtedly genetic influences, are altered by the interaction with the world around them and, responding accordingly, would create their own “truths”.

As a means of proposing a readily defined, wide-scale, more general set of tidy findings, this study could have been conducted through a positivist, quantitative piece of research and this was my first inclination. However, one of my aims was to better understand the views on the Mature student experience, and particularly those of the students themselves. The philosophy behind this study was rooted in digging deeply into what people thought; it was to be offered as a piece of work which took a thorough analysis of a small snapshot of the world. It was necessary to conduct a rich study which asked how and why certain perceptions had been adopted. It was finally decided to harvest a unique combination of factors through a qualitative approach, drawing on the phenomenological tradition within sociology,

using an interpretive stance and a developing with the aid of a theoretical framework of social construction.

The focus rested on the roles people assume, or are expected to assume, and their own understanding of what responsibilities and expectations that role carries as they enter, and expect to fit, within an ancient, traditional university within the Scottish HE sector at a mature age. In relation to Chapter 2, Vickers (1967:109) defines organisations as:

*“structures of mutual expectation, attached to roles which define what each of its members shall expect from others and from himself”*

If accepting this definition, the individual role assumed also must carry with it different interpretations of what living that experience means to them; whether or not the role expectation sits comfortably with the individual, their self-image or identity. This study therefore concentrates on the interaction point of the individual and the organisation and a multitude of outcomes merge in terms of different fulfilment of expectations, meanings, impressions, understandings and satisfaction on each side of that interaction.

The locus of the study was restricted to the case study of one institution in order to seek rich and deep data. The distinct combination of rural location, size and profile of prospective students was also seen to be significantly individual so as to make comparison with other universities unhelpful at this initial stage.

It could be said that research is not a study in the specific, for the epistemology of the researcher will necessarily have a strong bearing on the outcome of the study, producing a chameleon-type quality on the research. While, as suggested before, my approach in this study is consistent with my own ontological beliefs, this investigation, in its “set-up” stage, followed a complex process, requiring a significant degree of methodological reflection. It is the quality of this reflection that provides assurance as to the methodological rigour of the research.

## 8.2 The Process of Choosing a Methodological Paradigm

I have referred to “choice” to reflect how and why this study was conducted in the way it was. However, the actual process was more fundamental than the term implies and consisted of eliminating the inappropriate, the unsatisfactory and those mismatched with my ontological beliefs until I was left with an obvious “choice”. Reflection on the early stages of the process may offer some insight to methodological dilemmas faced by other researchers.

In embarking on the study, a positivistic paradigm was initially determined and then tested in a variety of formats. With this approach in mind, initially as a means of gaining generalisability and “robust” policy recommendations, a quantitative pilot study of non-traditional students was undertaken between July and September 2004. This approach was marked by objectivity, a format of surveys<sup>27</sup>, statistical analysis, and large samples with the reduction of phenomena to the simplest denominators.

In principle it should have worked. However, ultimately too many disadvantages were found and these are worth highlighting since their discovery was somewhat surprising to me:

- *Lack of appropriate theories of student diversity to test.*  
Legislation is driving the research development, but it is only now growing to any significant size. The formulation of new theories for this new body of research focus would be more appropriate than using previous particular theories as tests. One example would be the “fit” studies (Chatman, 1989) set in the employment world. The organisational profile could not be easily applied to the HE sector where diverse opinions amongst academics are fundamental to the maintenance of academic debate and knowledge quest.

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<sup>27</sup>

26, third year students, 72 entrant students and 55 staff took part in these surveys

- *Lack of definition consistency.*

Although the positivist approach is attractive to tidy up vague and unwieldy concepts (e.g. “diversity”, and “culture”) increasingly I became frustrated with, what began to feel to me to be, a somewhat artificial process of adjusting classification, leading to scepticism of my own pilot findings. I was of the opinion that the data was giving a distorted representation.

- *The “Why?”*

The labelling of participants by demographics in a quantitative format missed out much of what the people’s stories represented and left only half the story. The “Why?” behind the statistics was consistently missing and ontologically this became increasingly unsatisfactory and frustrating. I wanted to understand the reasoning and the meaning that people gave to their experiences and the quantitative study did not, indeed could not, do this.

- *An emergent research area.*

An initial attraction of the positivist paradigm had been the credibility for policy makers within HE. I realised that, although policy makers may well find some value from the research carried out in future years, the initial foundation work would be more richly informed through use of a qualitative paradigm. In this way I could explore the boundaries of the area and highlight areas of new questions and/or areas needing investigation which were revealed by my findings.

- *Depth.*

If the objective of this study was to understand interpretations of experiences, then exploration of internal, subjective feeling, interpretation, and understanding from the inside was implied, not using a numerical system which would categorise people according to necessarily more straightforward, quickly identified and, arguably, shallower definitions.

These reflections led to a halt in the study and reconsideration of the paradigm. It was a shock for me to have to admit that this was not the route, having concentrated for two years on exhausting alternative possibilities, determined to make the paradigm fit. Eventually I had to face the hard fact that the positivist approach had to be eliminated for it simply did not answer the questions that I wanted answered. I reflected on what I needed:

- This is a study of people. The methodology used had to take into account the complexities of studying the influences, perceptions and meanings in human lives, as well as their sense-making processes and outcomes.
- Most importantly, this study was trying to go some way to explaining and understanding the processes that Mature students interacted with, and the effect this had on them, and not simply describe these.
- The complexities required multiple points of perception and of data collection involving the same participant in an attempt to offer additional layers of insight.
- An aim was to be able to offer contributions, in practical and policy terms, as well as to theory and methodology at the end of the study.
- A clear definition of variable boundaries had to be used in order to avoid confusion and robust comparison across participants.

Since a Quantitative approach had not worked for me, the logical starting point was to try the alternative perspective. Almost immediately the qualitative approach seemed more comfortable and satisfying, offering the opportunity to focus on actual practice *in situ*. Supporting Winch's (1990) assertion that no serious interpretation of research is possible if the researcher does not understand what they are studying, my knowledge of the institutional systems assisted. The study followed a line

challenging the use of a quantitative methodology to examine human reasoning already made by Brunson *et al* (2000) who contended that interactionist and ethnographic approaches might result in a more appropriate theoretical framework when searching for explanations.

While the phenomenological approach provided me with the opportunity to develop a rich and insightful view of the Mature students' everyday lives, interpretivism presented further opportunities. It opened up the research area to investigate significant areas, combining the influence each had on the interaction with others providing a total which was larger than the sum of the individual parts. In addition, the sensitive use of an interpretivist approach, has been recognised for its ability to aid exploration and appreciation of interactions undertaken by, and the cognitive processes involved for, the participants (Fearfull, 2005).

### **8.3 Constructionism/Constructivism**

Gergen (1999:60) differentiates between two closely intertwined metatheories: social constructionism and constructivism. The former (with roots in Piaget [1977] and Kelly [1955]) defines when an individual constructs reality but within a systematic relationship to the external world while the latter (with roots in Wittgenstein, [McGinn, 1997], Foucault, [1980, 1982] and Garfinkel, [1967]) focuses on discourse as the route through which the interpretation is articulated. Critiques of the use of the Constructivist approach refer to the reality being rooted in the cognitive processes, lying often *within* an individual rather than *between* different individuals (Hjorland, 1992). Within my study, the adoption of the apparently less subjective and more demonstrated and articulated Social Constructionist approach was to reflect the interactive focus while, once again, sharing a more comfortable congruence with my personal ontological beliefs.

Theories of the social construction of reality propose that individuals understand particular systems in the environment in different ways – by attaching meanings to them according to their own bias. Influencing factors on this process include

genetic and environmental background (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1999) with specific factors outlined as power, perception, emotive force, legitimacy and status (Huxham and Beech; 2003). Routines and language assist each person in understanding their environment and are channels through which they can convey mixed messages remembering what they can of an experience in relation to what fitted best with their original thoughts. Language, the particularly powerful tool by which individuals position themselves, both in relation to, and by, others (McConnell-Ginet, 2000), thus facilitates the development of identity of both individuals, and organisations (Humphreys & Brown, 2002b).

Given congruent circumstances, these meanings can be shared with others of a like mind, to the point where accepted social systems become “shared realities” and dominant beliefs are reinforced (Gergen, 1999; Johnson *et al*, 2000; Weick, 1979). However, alternatively, an interpretation which may seem sensible when considered in isolation, once intertwined with others’ constructions can create disharmony and confusion. On occasions, it may not be possible to mediate between the understandings. If no compromise is found, taking the example of the management setting, one possible outcome can be the “fatalism” of managers (Beech and Cairns, 2001) as a form of defeatism sets in and it appears that, whatever is said to people, they will take out of it what they want and not shift their opinion.

The Social Constructionist framework which defines this approach has developed theoretically over the past 50 years (McLeod and Chaffee, 1972; Jones and Day, 1977), has been referred to in work on organisational change and development (Huxham and Beech, 2003 [Tensions]; Cairns and Beech, 1999 [Use of expert consultants]; Luscher *et al*, 2006 [Paradoxes]), has been related to accounts of learning (Piaget, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978), the development of Identity through social interactions (Olsson and Walker, 2004) and to the educational setting (Best, 1990; McDonough, 1994; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Waller, 2005).

In contrast to the essentialist school, I identified the framework as a tool for examination of how the participants in my study built, adjusted, highlighted, prioritised and discarded many features of their environment, and ranked events or circumstances in terms of personal importance, until they came up with their own interpretation of how to “be”. This is a process that Soden and Maclellan (2005) noted and is included in the term “critical thinking” described by Kuhn (1991). By separating beliefs from evidence and, using selective aspects of the evidence, an individual can reconstruct the new belief with conviction and then act or behave accordingly. Within my professional training I have been encouraged to develop skills of perceiving events wherever possible through the eyes of others, in relation to, and influenced by, their background context, history and belief. It is exemplified in my professional daily interaction with students, where I never cease to be amazed at the “*multiple realities*” (Cairns and Beech, 1999) derived by different people from the same event, how they express that, and amazingly, how their interpretation can change after they have spoken to someone else about it.

With interpretation come different levels of empowerment, hence elements of structure and agency (Chapter 2) are critical to understanding an individual’s resultant actions or inactions. The definition of social structures has been seen as central in influencing the actions of the actors (Bourdieu, 1989); arenas within which actors struggle to enhance their “*symbolic capital*”, a term which encompasses “*social, cultural and economic capital*” (Bourdieu, 1993). My study followed the balance between the structure surrounding the Mature student role and the agency of the person filling that role. Potential constraints on agency were seen to include the structurally-related factors such as organisational and governmental policies and procedural infrastructure targeted towards the traditional student conflicting with the personal responsibilities often carried by Mature students. (Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1976; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

The Social Constructionist approach offered the overall possibility of understanding and explaining the phenomena I was researching, not just describing it. Assuming a

constructionist ontological background, the Mature student experience has a number of realities depending upon: what particular environment they are submerged in; what their personal background experiences are; what private pressures they cope with; how they related to other students in their course, and how new or how familiar the role is to them now. Investigation of this area kept mindful of the hidden values and unspoken biases of other individual actors within the arena. The Researcher is not exempted from this.

#### **8.4 Researcher Involvement**

Throughout my research work, I carried dual identity. On the one hand I brought into my research a complex history of racial, cultural, gender and age bias, in the same way as does every other researcher. I had to consider that I could be labelled a white, red-headed, middle-aged, female, Glaswegian, first generation in HE, single parent with all the biases that these defining characteristics might be thought to stereotypically carry (bigoted, fiery-natured, determined, loud, extroverted?). On the other, professional basis, I started this study when at a junior staff level but, through a series of promotions, found myself at the final data collection point embedded in the formal senior management of the institution, a position which could have led to obvious accusations of prejudice. I was also acutely conscious of the possible power imbalance with the student participants which could have had two further implications:

- Participants could have expected that policy implementation would automatically be a result of their documented experiences or complaints.
- The power imbalance could have induced discomfort in them inhibiting their disclosure of personal opinions about the institution when I was a senior representative of such.

Having emerged from a positivist pilot study, I was aware that maintaining independence would be difficult, even with anonymous and/or remote

correspondence; and mindful of Mayo (1949) that the very act of paying attention to the participants in the study could change their resultant behaviour. Personal integrity demanded transparency, and positivism denied the richness and depth of investigation encouraged by a closer relationship with the participants. My belief therefore was that conflict of interests or research influences had to be acknowledged and openly tackled to minimise their effects at the research design stage.

In terms of my professional working relationship with colleagues, I was reassured, because, in the academic spirit of the “*search for truth!*” my colleagues and senior management supported the project, reiterating their desire to gain student feedback, in determination to provide an informed, evidence-based, service.

The initial interviews with participants were carried out face-to-face, offering an atmosphere of transparency and personal reassurance. The participants had the rationale behind the research explained to them and, although institutional change in procedures could have been suggested from the data, it was stressed that the management of these would lie at local management level. I was acutely aware of the two “*hats*” that I donned in the process. I would, therefore, not have any control over this process regardless of my additional role as manager. If a participant became distressed at any point in the interviews, I had planned to stop the interview and assist as any researcher would. If, however, the issues raised had caused anything other than very short-term distress, I would not put on my professional hat, but I had planned that they would be referred and facilitated to a meeting with someone from Student Support. (This did not, in fact, occur).

In order to build trust, and recognising power imbalance, critical emphasis on anonymity of reporting was maintained. Written undertakings of the confidentiality and personal documentation anonymity were formally undertaken with the University’s Departmental Ethics committee (see Appendix 5 for summary of Ethics information provided). Acknowledgement was given to the ethical

definition (or perception) of power on either side carrying an ability to distort the study. The letter of invitation (see Appendix 6) was worded deliberately in a friendly way, to encourage participants to feel at ease, not only to heighten chances of participation but also as a means of being able to gather honest and open data when the interviews began.

While not formally considering myself a participant observer, it is clear that, as a mature student undertaking a course of PhD study, I was, in fact sharing some common experiences with my participants. Undergraduate distinctiveness could not be overlooked, especially when laid next to my long-term knowledge of the institution from a staff angle. The element of participant observation, moving in a fluid pattern between the world of researcher and employee, did help to avoid some potential clashes of culture, shared some experiences and achieved a measure of data triangulation (Denzin, 1978), balancing some of the participants' data. Nevertheless, I had to regularly revisit the check that I was not, unintentionally, influencing results.

## **8.5 Ethics**

University-required confidentiality and ethical processes assisted in assuring credibility of my role. However I believe the building of trust relied, fundamentally, on transparency of process. At the commencement of data collection there was an acute awareness of the need for personal confidentiality in the small world of Higher Education in the UK, within the circle of Scottish universities and, in particular, within the focus institution, a very close community and so pseudonyms were used from the coding point onwards.

A checklist for the method design acted as a personal monitor throughout the process, ensuring adherence to the standards outlined in the initial contextual information and contract offered to the participants:

- *no harm to participants*
  - *full informed consent*
  - *no invasion of privacy*
  - *no deception*
- (Diener and Crandall, 1978)

Applicants were asked to sign an Ethics agreement form (Appendix 7a and 7b provides blank copies of the separate forms used for students and staff), which gave an explanation of the information to be gathered, and the purpose for which it was to be used along with undertakings of ethical assurance being given.

Permission to undertake this study was sought, and obtained, following university procedures, from the School of Management and from the University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC) in the host university. Additional ethical permission was obtained at further stages when conducting personal interviews with staff.

## **8.6 Participant Selection**

### **8.6.1 Students**

The original sample was selected in 2004, the dominant categorisation in age terms according to the “Mature” term. At this point, some studies using different criteria to classify narratives of identity were explored. Brown *et al* (2005) had explored narratives according to organisational function through its economic, moral, or pleasurable drives. Brown *et al* triggered me to consider classification criteria other than age and so, beginning with the initial foci of the student journey, expectations, and motivation. However, a significant classic study to which I kept returning was that of Havigurst (1952) who described the general post-adolescent development of adults throughout their lifespan and, in doing so divided the life data into three categories: early adulthood (18 – 30 years), middle adulthood (30 – 55 years) and late adulthood (55 years and over), in this way identifying according to a stereotypical classification (in line with the Social Identity Theory, Tajfel[1981]). With a constructionist perspective, lacking any enthusiasm to use basic objective prototypes as the categorisation, I nonetheless could not help but be intrigued by the

clusters developing links between, initially, the expectation and motivations (and possibly, thereafter, integration, daily lives, etc.) of the student participants and their individual psychological development. I kept the Havigurst classification in mind, but wanted the Chapter 7 classification of themes to allow the data to speak initially as a block and to see how far the age divisions co-incided with these themed differences.

In order to present this diversity of perspectives, the selection of Mature students was controlled by sub-dividing the students into particular groups according to mode of study and access route. The selection was carried out electronically using the official student data record in Registry. The sub divisions consisted of:

- Group 1. First year entrants
- Group 2. Final year students
- Group 3. Students permanently withdrawn in the previous 2 years
- Group 4. Full time daytime students from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year
- Group 5. Access Summer School participants over 21 years
- Group 6. Part-time, Evening Degree students over 21 years

Four participants were sought from each group, although it was recognised that some overlap would be present (for example some of Group 2 and 4 students had been Group 5 or Group 6 originally, entering through Access or Part-time doors). In the first four groups, a random selection was systematically chosen by administrators in the Registry unit of the University from the main electronic student record identified by matriculation number. After isolating the students who first matriculated at over the age of 21 years of age, choice was determined firstly by year of study, then by a cross sector representation of age (broadly ensured that 4 students from each decade of age were invited to participate). This offered an additional age variable but there was no intention of dealing with these students according to their decade classification.

Gender and faculty of study were then taken into account and the data manipulated by Registry, changing the random allocation to ensure representation in these two groups (for example, the overall student representation in Faculty was 2/3rds Arts, 1/3 Science and an overall 64% female population).

In the last two groups, those of Access Summer School students and Part-time, Evening degree students, I was invited by the Course Co-ordinators to go into the classroom and explain the project and asked for four volunteers from the group. In Group 5, the Access Summer School students, I had seven offers of participation. The four chosen from this group were selected to ensure a cross representation as outlined above. In Group 6 only three people offered to participate and, although they were not cross-representational, these were all taken. This resulted in an initial total of 23 students.

The lower limit of participation was aimed to be 12 allowing for an almost 50% dropout rate. The numbers of Mature students at this University are small with this sample of 23 representing 5.8% of the overall Mature student body. I reasoned that the richness of the data, albeit in small numbers, produced by an in-depth, multi-faceted and highly qualitative approach would be preferable to a more superficial cover of a larger number. Given the depth of information which I hoped to gain from these students, we would be involved in lengthy interviews totalling a minimum of two and a half hours each and they would live for a period of four months documenting their daily lives.

A table of participants (anonymous) is detailed in the following Table 8.6.1.1, giving details of age classification, and course demographics:

**Table 8.6.1.1**

**Demographic breakdown of Student Participants**

Student Code	Code	Pseudonym	Sex and Faculty	Year of Course	Course format	Selection Criteria	Participant	Faculty
YMS	1	Anna	F	1	ACC/MAIN	5	Yes	A
YMS	2	Sarah	F	3	MAIN	4	Yes	M/S
YMS	3	Katerina	F	5	MAIN	2	Yes	S
YMS	20	Hannah	F	1	ACC/MAIN	1	leave study	A
YMS	5	Lesley	F	1	ACC/MAIN	5	Yes	A
YMS	4	David	M	1	ACC/MAIN	1	leave study	S
YMS	6	Eddie	M	3	MAIN	4	Yes	A
YMS	7	Wendy	F	1	MAIN	1	Yes	A
MLS	9	Pauline	F	5	E/D - MAIN	2	Yes	A
MLS	10	Linda	F	1	E/D	6	Yes	M/S
MLS	11	Grant	M	2	ACC/MAIN	4	Yes	A
MLS	12	Julia	F	1	ACC/MAIN	5	Yes	S
MLS	13	Ros	F	2	E/D	6	Yes	A
MLS	22	Liz	F	w/d	E/D	3	leave study	A
MLS	14	Nigel	M	3	ACC/MAIN	6	Yes	A
MLS	8	Patrick	M	4	ACC/MAIN	2	w/drew	A
LLS	15	Willie	M	1	ACC/MAIN	1	Yes	A
LLS	17	Margaret	F	3	MAIN	4	Yes	A
LLS	18	Alex	M	4	MAIN	2	Yes	A
LLS	21	Brian	M	1	ED/MAIN	5	Yes	S
LLS	16	Ruth	F	w/d	E/D	3	w/drew	A
LLS	19	John	M	w/d	ACC/MAIN	3	no reply	S
LLS	23	Peter	M	w/d	MAIN	3	no reply	A

**COLOUR CODING AS BELOW:**

FACULTY	YEAR	FORMAT
ARTS	1	MAINSTREAM ENTRY
SCIENCE	2	E/D - EVENING DEGREE PROGRAMME ONLY
	3	ACC/MAIN ACCESS/ MAINSTREAM
	4 /5	ED/MAIN - EVE DEG. /MAINSTREAM
	w/d	

**SELECTION CRITERIA:** as per groups 1- 6, see page 172

## 8.6.2 Staff

Three bodies of staff were selected: Academics, members of the University Court, the governing body of the institution (referred to as “Governors”), and Senior Managers (referred to as the “Managers”). For each group, a central co-ordinator was chosen to select the participants.

- *The “Academics”*

Human Resources selected six participants by dividing their database into three categories using criteria of longevity of service and selected two from each by random computer method. The three categories selected two Heads of Schools, two mid-career, and two in the early stage of their career.

- *The “Governors”*

Chosen critically by a third party working for the Court Office on the grounds of ability to offer a wide perspective of opinion, length of service and interaction with external HE sector bodies on behalf of the institution.

- *The “Managers”*

The Assistant to the Principal selected five senior members of the Principal’s Office to participate, all at Vice or Assistant Principal level. A cross representation of varying areas of university responsibility was sought from Estates, Teaching, Research and Governance.

## 8.7 Participant Response

### 8.7.1 Students

Of the 23 participants who were approached, 21 students replied, agreeing to take part. The two who did not respond were in Group 3, and were the ones who had left the university without completing a degree. Repeated attempted contact reaped no reply. This was unsurprising since the time immediately post-university can be a pressurised one. It seems reasonable that these people were getting on with their new lives or did not want to be reminded about a previous one.

Subsequently, of the 21 students who replied, a further person dropped out at the point of the initial interview with no explanation, and two more withdrew during the first stage of data recording, both declaring that time restraints prohibited them from continuing. While it was perhaps possible to minimise the effort which they would have to contribute, I decided against persuading in this direction. My personal standards were that, given the nature of the study, consistently in-depth information was vital. If I had accepted a minimal input from them, it would have skewed the findings by offering them a platform to declare bias without taking the time to offer context and depth. I therefore continued with the intense sample. Two further students withdrew from the university and, despite a letter asking if they wished to have an exit interview on their experience, neither replied, with similarities to the first two Group 3 withdrawals in the project.

The remaining 16, however, did go on to participate fully in the study. In addition, some months into the study period, one Mature student who was withdrawing from the institution and a personal contact of one of my participants, wrote a detailed letter describing her experiences as a Mature student and her reasons for withdrawal. Her contribution has only been used for confirmation and has not been critical to any findings.

#### 8.7.2 Staff

All members of the Governors and the Managers groups were willing to participate in the study. The four Academics in the mid-career and Head of School category were keen to take part. However, despite repeated attempts to make contact, the junior members of Academic staff declined to reply. This gave an overall participant group of 12.

### **8.8 Method**

All participants were invited in writing to come for an individual, informal chat with me about the study. In the case of staff, I offered to go to them in writing or by email. This was firstly to explain the rationale behind the research and, secondly

to establish a contract for the participation as outlined earlier. Thirdly, in the case of students, I offered explanations of the particular method of data recording chosen and their role in this. Ultimately the aim developed to construct summaries of the social and academic world of the Mature student from different perspectives. With this in mind, the multi-faceted approach of analysing documentation was adopted, using autobiographical accounts, narratives, questioning, and interviewing.

With the student participants, the use of journals (as described below) had been suggested in initial invitations, but the extent to which these were to be used was more fully described at this point. Suggestions of student issues were listed as reflection points<sup>28</sup>, while encouraging them to record additional areas of personal significance. The rationale was that this qualitative study, incorporating on-going participation rather than the one-off qualitative interview, would benefit from the generation of a significant level of data for interpretation.

#### 8.8.1 Personal Documentary Data: Journals (Students)

During first semester Mature students were supplied with, and asked to maintain, a journal describing their experiences and, most importantly, the interpretation they put on these. The use of journals, or daily diaries, as a form of data collection is not new in research, having been particularly applied in medical research (Richardson, 1994) and typically in studies of epidemiology (Day *et al*, 2001). The accuracy of these timely records has shown themselves to capture particular experiences not possible using other, traditional, methods. Recognised benefits have included the ability to track changes in self-development and attitude (particularly appropriate in this study), thus identifying the variability of mood rather than the mean over a period of time (Bolger *et al*, 2003).

Four journal formats were tested on some of the participants and a small, thick, A5 format was chosen; an easily portable style. A computer version was created as an alternative choice. The journals were subdivided into three identified parts of the

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<sup>28</sup> The hand-out listing these Journal Reflective Points is attached in Appendix 8

university calendar for first semester and had “reflection points”<sup>29</sup> - phases in the University Calendar when particular events were highlighted – and already marked in them. These triggers were to encourage reflection on the personal interaction with systems and services used at particular times of the year. Some of the reflection points asked the participants for a retrospective view, e.g. to remember motivations prior to arrival.

In my opinion, there were five clear advantages of using journals:

- Individual meanings particular to each participant would be highlighted. Therefore their choice of issues would be presented, not those that I might have assumed were significant.
- They encouraged private thoughts; participants were initially more open than at face-to-face interview at least for broad reference, allowing further investigation at interview.
- They allowed control of personal disclosure to the participants in private space prior to interview. Three participants commented favourably on this at interview.
- They focused the semi-structured interview, while still offering the opportunity for rich, deep, detailed descriptions.
- The structure of the 18 aspects of the first semester offered the opportunity for semi-structured comparison between stories.

The ownership of the journals was regulated by the institutional policy on Intellectual Property which allocated the ownership of the data to the researcher and this was explained to the participants.

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<sup>29</sup> Outlined in Appendix 8

## 8.9 Analysis of Journals

There could be a tendency to believe that the evidence speaks for itself in a clean, objective, rational process. In reality, teasing out can reveal what can be a subjective, organic, and messy matter with subjective interpretations. The potentially contaminated aspect of the process overshadowed the analysis and drove a conscious search for bias awareness at regular intervals.

Appropriately, (in the spirit of individual Constructionism) each participant approached the journal writing with their own particular perspective; some had daily narratives of material, some with bullet points addressing the 18 reflective points offered as triggers. The freedom for them to use their own comfortable format was vital to the success of the project in establishing control for the release of information to the participants. They described their methods for journal completion: some carried their journal with them everywhere they went; others put aside time last thing at night as they sat up in bed; some met at lunchtime with friends to update their journal and offer their account with some commenting that their other Mature student friends (not participating in the study) had offered input. One female participant confessed it had become a joint project with her husband (another non-participant Mature student). One male wrote in narrative format, highlighting points of a particularly sensitive nature which he then that followed up at interview, (expressing shyness at writing it down). From the beginning, the level of personal feelings they were prepared to document was unexpected.

The data management was assisted, to some extent, by the documentation from the participants being already in written format. Five participants chose to diarise in computer format, with 11 bringing in hard copy journals. The focus of the initial analysis was on familiarising myself with the raw data, making connections, noting frequency of use of particular phrases and words, identifying patterns and structures in individual data sets and between participants' personal accounts. Gradually key themes began to reveal themselves as patterns within, and correlating with, the literature pattern discussed in Part II.

Until this point, and in spite of my commitment to a qualitative approach, I had been deliberately erring on the side of mechanistic tendencies where possible. This, quite deliberately, was used as a defence against any perceived bias on my part by identifying what I would consider would be areas of importance. However, the second stage had been designed to allow more creativity with the assurance that the participants themselves had chosen the priorities up to this point. The assumption could be that the journals were self-declaring and this was all the participants had to say on the subject. However the hints of underlying reasons became apparent as the next stage involved close inspection of the raw data, interrogating it, splitting it up, taking alternative slices of it to find different angles of viewing it and different pathways through it, an intuitive process, described by Woolcott (1994) as “Transformation”. A similar process is described by Dey (1993) as “Classification” and by Huberman and Miles (1994) as “Data Reduction”. Personally preferring the Woolcott description, I found in the others an implication that the data is static, rigid or diminished throughout the process, by selection and even loss of data; and this was not my experience. In the spirit of the interactive process, the richness of the material in front of me was combined and consolidated in effect when links were found with other data; the raw material seemed to grow in terms of alternative meanings and questions were raised again and again with each segment identified and coding verified according to a code list (Appendix 9). Analysis maps helped to manage the data in a typology displayed pictorially as I worked (examples provided of two stages in Appendices 10a and b). The meanings were checked and expanded upon with participants in further interviews.

During the analysis process quotes were identified as representative of the labelled sections as in Appendices 10a and b. However, given the possible use of numerous alternative quotes, the eventual quotes used were chosen using the criteria of representation of the others. The dramatic or exceptions were avoided and attention had to be given to retaining the anonymity which could have inadvertently been betrayed. The eventual usage within the thesis was targeted at a *fair* representation of the viewpoints raised by the participants.

What I found most appropriate throughout the analytical process was highlighted in the observation by Coffey and Atkinson (1996:10):

*“data are segmented and divided into meaningful units, but connection to the whole unit is maintained”*

This could represent a pre-emptory caution in response to those advocating narrative analysis as a useful tool for my work. The narrative approach had been the most obvious analytic style to consider. It seemed highly sensible to present the stories of the participants in terms of Labov's model (1982) telling what the story is about, by examining what happens through to a final conclusion. The journals of two participants (*Nigel and Margaret*) did seem to fit well within this model in the way the participants formatted them. They also cross-linked many of their statements making division of data very difficult without losing some of the context and meaning. Expanding on the preceding statement, they presented an interpretation greater than the sum of the two separate statements, and this richness would have been lost if an individual segment in their journal had been taken out of context.

In considering and re-considering the journals and their contents, it became obvious that verification and further exploration was needed if meanings were to be drawn. More questions were raised than were answered by the process and so, after coding into the 18 themes, some areas of questions were identified within each which were worth exploring with each participant and the study was taken forward to the second stage of semi-structured interviews conducted throughout the second semester. In addition to the standard questions (listed in Appendix 11) which formed the outline of these second stage interviews, highlighted statements in the journals were individually queried with the appropriate participant assisting with clarification and avoiding erroneous interpretation. The objective was to ensure that the final resulting account was one with which the participant was content as being an accurate reflection of the personal meaning they placed on their experience.

## **8.10 Semi-Structured Interviews**

### **8.10.1 Students**

I was of the view that to leave the interview entirely unstructured would have easily taken the conversation along irrelevant tangents. The sensitivity of the data and the personal disclosures would have further encouraged this. The journals were used as key to establish the semi-structuring of the interviews, the topics under discussion with each participant being “driven” by their journal entries.

Thus, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the highlighting of individual journal statements in addition to introducing concepts emerging from across the journals and offered the opportunity to do this without losing the benefit of a framework, given that the area under examination was too vast to cover in a few hours’ discussion.

The interviews were, however, free enough that the conversation could develop in directions where very personal information might be offered. The environment had to be, essentially, a “safe” and comfortable space for each participant. While it had been my original intention to audiotape all my interviews, having secured participants’ permission, in the end this intention was abandoned for reasons outlined below. Thus, some were audiotaped, some not. The interviews were conducted in students’ own place of choice (some chose open spaces – *i.e.* pubs, others chose closed offices), accompanied by sometimes coffees, sometimes *cappuccinos* and, always offered, cakes.

Initially permission to audiotape was sought. On the whole, agreement was given, but half way through the discussion, as a very personal concern was described, the participant dried up. In the first case, as I offered to turn off the tape the participant appeared to interpret this as a sign of my commitment to confidentiality. In the subsequent three audiotaped interviews, participants seemed ill at ease and uncomfortable at varying stages. Again, I offered to stop the tape and, again, they

relaxed and their willingness to go into more depth was apparent in the latter half of the interview. I changed my request for taping to make the request more neutral and the following two participants quickly chose the option not to be taped. At that point I abandoned taping completely. Notes were taken and “quotes” were checked verbally with the participants, repeating my own recording back to them for checking.

On further questioning, three participants referred to their eagerness to “tell their story” but revealed their concern that they could not be candid if criticising because they were aware of my official position in the University. On the other hand, my official position in the University was seen by some to place me at some advantage encouraging participants to feel safe and thus the extent to which some were prepared to go on describing personal details was unexpected. One participant summarised it by saying:

*“I know I can trust you knowing your position in the Uni and all.....even though I know this is your private research. Still – you’re not going to be doing the job you do in the daytime if you were to go and blab it around everyone, would you?”*

The obvious trust the participants were placing in me reinforced my existing resolve to develop a fair reflection of their perspectives, giving them secondary comment opportunities prior to using the data. It also, once again, reiterated my dual role emphasising the need for conscious awareness of ethical boundaries. Quotes allowed the demonstration of figurative speech of the participants to be highlighted, their rhetoric and metaphors, giving insight to the interpretation of their experiences.

The number of semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant varied according to the complexity of the story they had to tell. Each participant had an initial interview which lasted approximately one and a half to two hours. Some needed follow-up interactions and some needed three or four shorter (one hour)

interviews. The format was dictated by the commitments and the personality, or emotions, of the participant.

At the end of each set of interviews, a transcript was compiled by myself and sent to the participant. This checked accuracy in the transcript but also gave them control over the final decision over the release of the data. Some adjustment of meaning was clarified, but all participants repeated their permission to use the material.

#### 8.10.2. Staff

Interviews with academic staff were straightforward to arrange and relaxed in content and flow with the contact as a one-off session of considerably shorter length than those of the students. However those with the other two groups necessitated some clarification of boundary roles and reassurance of confidentiality to allow the safe space to be formed before the interview could take place. “House rules” were explained referring to my unfamiliar role as researcher, their voice as institutional representative and the use of data with evidenced quotes. The purpose was not to give empty promises but to delineate the field in order for each participant to then make a personal decision on the level and depth of information they would be prepared to reveal. Given my experience of the student participants, I estimated that control by the interviewee led to richer data.

Frequent reassurance of confidentiality was sought. The belief that I was aiming to gain advantageous information to help students and institutional performance in future minimised initial anxieties of their being quoted speaking against an institution in which, without exception, they all clearly believed. Once again, I believe their ultimate agreement was enhanced because of my colleague stance and included them in being partners in this discovery process.

### **8.11 Credibility and Dependability**

Clarification of the participants' transcripts was established. If this study was to explore fully their social constructions, then contamination by inappropriate researcher interpretation without caution had to be avoided. Barrett (1987) reminds us that this form of research can be highly subjective, at least in terms of selecting priorities, leading interview focus and paraphrasing of data resulting in it being unintentionally misleading. The *aide-memoire* for credibility, insofar as qualitative research is able to be replicated in principal rather than in exactitude, was that a similarity of findings might be achieved by another researcher. However, the Falsification view (Popper, 1959) outlines that every statement is only true until it can be proved false, so striving to document findings which would have the robustness to be replicated by another became a guide, a challenge and, given my distinct managerial position within the institution, a potential limitation to this study. The process was a balancing act: the credibility of the researcher role, given the degree and quality of my access to management and governor staff, the lack of taping equipment and the trust placed in me by participants, all were uppermost in my thoughts and actions throughout this process.

The method used ultimately has clear limitations. As has been said, the direct generalisability of the data, the applicability across other institutions and other student groups, was not obvious. The method has given the opportunity to experience the phenomenon which I was studying, while the detail that I found has had to be organised and I have been acutely aware that, in this fairly complex process, a hundred interpretations were possible. It has been labour intensive, led to less clear decisions in the early stages and has relied on an inductive, exploratory process. Thus the exercise became one of being as detailed as possible and the generalisability of the data became a particularly challenging aspect for a study aimed at producing theoretical and policy guidance.

## 8.12 Summary

Although reflecting on the role of the individual within an organisation involves analysis on both personal and organisational levels, the real area of interest for me was the dynamics that occur at the crossover and the combined effects of the two.

I have gone some way to describe the quantitative pilot study, and I defend its right of place in this thesis. The effect of the practical defeat of this method on me was profound. Having held faith in quantitative approaches up to this point, I was surprised to find that it sat uncomfortably with my ontological beliefs and, in practical terms, proved inflexible and incomplete, telling only part of the story which I wanted to investigate. I therefore decided that the study required a qualitative approach to give depth of meaning to the experience of the individuals and to provide a multi-faceted approach offering flexibility of process. To provide a theoretical framework, the Social Constructionist approach helped identify shared meanings of experiences, offering the added perspective of investigating the use of the individual agency within the structure of the institution.

I increasingly became aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the dual-role of researcher and university manager. While maintaining strict ethical codes, I aimed to gain the trust of the participants while attempting to maintain transparency and confidentiality for them. If asked by any participant to give them a favour in my University staff role, I took the broad principle of “Do one, do them all”, asking myself if this was something I would do for any student. If not, then I would decline. However it remained an area of complex ambiguity and, necessarily, one of which I was conscious throughout.

After the withdrawal of some students from the university, others who had withdrawn from the study, and Registry achieving a cross representational section of those Mature students registered at the University, I began the data collection with a core group of 16 student and 12 staff participants. (Original minimal numbers had been aimed at 12 students and 6 staff). Short vignettes, sketching an

outline on examples of student members is available in Appendix 12. It however, was thought to be unwise to offer similar vignettes on the staff participants, given the difficulty of retaining anonymity in a small university, with very small numbers in particular staffing areas. I would argue that the nature and depth of the study justifies the tight participant numbers. The nature of the information I wanted to glean was also very personal and could have been perceived by the participants to carry the personal risks associated with disclosure. Intensifying the numbers to be studied kept the focus on the depth and richness, while maintaining the manageability of data in parallel.

The aim of the data collection and analysis was to produce Social Constructionist profiles of Mature students from a variety of perspectives (Chapter 13) alongside offering broader contributions to theoretical, practical, methodological and political debates (Chapter 12). Most of all, it was to open up this area of study, to highlight new areas for exploration from the inside, welcoming other academic researchers to cross over to the other side and view the student experience.

The next Part (IV) of this thesis is divided into three chapters which mirror those of the literature reviews (Part II) but with a discussion of the findings of the data once the outlined method outlined was applied and, in the process, tackled the 13 questions directing the discussions in Chapter 7, (Part III).

## PART IV – DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

### Chapter 9

#### Purposes versus Expectations

##### *Before the Interaction*

#### **9.1 Introduction**

If the purpose of the institution is harmonised with the expectations of the students, the outcome is likely to be an increasingly valuable student experience (James, 2002; Lowe & Cook, 2004). This chapter, therefore, considers what each set of actors; staff and students participants, understand of the role of an ancient, rural university within the total sphere of lifelong learning. I paid particular attention to the background cultural influences of individuals and the social interaction of the staff and students underpinning their daily activities and creating interpretations of the experience. The findings offered here are the results of having taken a particular slice of the social action and, because of the social constructionist perspective, often adopting a critical stance to the stereotypical interpretation.

Shortly after analysis began and themes were explored, sub-categorisation of shared views between staff and students started to emerge as themes. Thereafter, disparate views were clustered into approaches according to staff role profiles; Governors, Managers and Academics. The students, although I rejected the classification at first as superficial, kept returning to interpretations which clustered in groups which might best be described in terms of age.

Examining the broad themes identified in Chapter 4 and relating back to the questions identified in Chapter 7, I begin by exploring what the data said on the understandings around university purpose.

## 9.2 Views on Purpose

In Chapter 7, pulling together the emerging themes on purpose, the question highlighted was:

*“Is there a common vision of University purpose amongst the study participants or a recognisable pattern of clusters reflecting distinct purposes for groups of participants sharing particular characteristics?”*

### 9.2.1 Shared Staff Understandings

The staff participants, on the whole, shared the view that knowledge transfer was rightfully placed as the current lowest priority for ancient universities (supporting the view of Minogue [1973: 26], in Chapter 3). They claimed legitimacy in the view, espousing the core institutional belief that it should not be a prime concern of an ancient university to prepare people for employment or to conduct research in line with Government or industry targets only. Furthermore, they refuted the notion that their structure be used to minimise individual agency of students to determine, harvest and control their own future (supporting Chomsky in Davidson, 1997, Norris, 2001) or to limit the search field for research. Academics stressed that knowledge transfer is investment intensive and that the driving demand for immediate results from the Government would encourage “*window-dressing*” only.

*“All academics would like to think that their work will filter through to use in society, but the imparting of knowledge will mutate through people to a finished product which may be a combination of perspectives depending on whom it passed through” (Academic B)*

*“It’s happening – laser stuff, Cancer blast science, Sustainable development. But it’s way down the list and we’re not happy about any hint of us being used as social engineers...” (Manager J)*

*“The university sees in its head that it can feed back to society but this purpose hasn’t dug right into the university heart” (Governor E)*

One Academic (D) thought the university should grasp the current opportunity to exercise more of a role in terms of political, social, educational and community relations. He thought the opportunity for universities to provide knowledge for the

industrial sector was being lost where it could provide an incentive to create knowledge. However representing the majority view, the counter-argument that this limits the breadth of knowledge, was summarised by Academic B:

*“Government seems to be expecting universities to support [them] when, actually, it should be the other way around”.*

All staff identified the importance of interdependency between the four listed purposes which were upheld as touching the main bases by the staff data, with some additional suggestions of purpose which I can collectively term “Ideology”. This term was first promoted by Academic B who was particularly passionate on stressing society’s consistent need for an ideology or an intellectual stimulus and nominated university as the provider. However others supported the theme by suggesting university should be “*an adventure*” or the centre to “*promote mental agility*” and to “*enthuse people with similar creative minds to share their ideas*”. Alongside the shared perceptions, there were distinct priorities of purpose to each of the three pre-identified staff categories.

### 9.2.2 Governors

Generally, the Governors gave more priority to the role of Ancient universities in the personal developmental process linking directly to an overall better society:

*“Bettering Society has to be the priority aspiration” (Governor, C)*

Research and teaching were identified as tools to achieve that aim. Relating to Newman’s (1860) “better people” debate discussed in Chapter 3, the Governor opinion made a consequential link between intellectual development leading to better people and thereon to collective, societal, betterment. The Governors, with regret, doubted that the betterment of society was prioritised as a core purpose by managers and academics.

Indeed they were correct in this, and the majority of the student participants supported their stance. Student participants referred to an enhancement of self (examined in detail in Chapter 11), but fundamentally rejected Newman's extension of "goodness" in a collective sense and did not accept a legitimacy of the Scottish Executive's use of universities as instruments of social change, claiming to create an informed, cultured population (Universities-Scotland 2002c). This purpose would take us potentially into what I would term a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1982), but which they rejected in terms of "able to be manipulated".

*"We may make better people. Good. That's laudable. But we don't make a better society – no way" (Manager J)*

Why do Governors share such an idealistic goal? One supposition might be that the altruistic volunteering by Governors is driven by the belief (and the reward) that they are contributing to the potential for a better society as a result. The salaried Managers and Academics seemed reluctant to assume responsibility for making better people seeing it as an "*accidental*" outcome of education. However, it was acknowledged that, even in an Ancient, an external relevancy was creeping in:

*".....a decade ago [Academics] may have argued that this was not their business, but they accept concepts now that they have not in the past – e.g. employability and transferable skills. They seem defeated in accepting this has to be partly their business, but it is in a "ticking box" way – not necessarily absorbing or embracing the core spirit of the agendas. (Academic A)*

It would seem that the ability to remain remote from the external relevance has been the privilege of Ancient staff for longer than those in new universities or vocational colleges, although even that would seem to be changing.

### 9.2.3 Managers

Although research was recognised as the financially lucrative purpose, all except one manager (an ex-academic) thought teaching *should be* the key institutional purpose. One justification was that, while research could be an isolated activity, teaching united the institutional staff from divergent sectors, offering the physical

focus of students around whom an institutional vision is created, a critical factor of successful management.

Far from aiming for a “better society”, Managers were the one group who were even uncomfortable with aspirations of managing the process to make “better” individuals, preferring to limit institutional responsibility to making knowledge available, but placing the ownership and motivation for using that knowledge on the student.

*“.....it gets us into the sphere of what’s better?.....We offer knowledge, sources of ideas. We present a different way of looking at something. Individuals decide what they’re going to take out of that and ultimately what they’re going to do with it.” (Manager I)*

#### 9.2.4 Academics

Unsurprisingly, in a research institution, the Academics prioritised research. They justified their focus as being for the students’ benefit also, even though the students may not realise it.

*“Research. Students would say Teaching, but indirectly they would need Research to be high in priorities. The Research is what makes them come to the institution...it’s what gives the institution its elite profile. Ultimately the students are buying a ticket and they need the high research profile”. (Academic A)*

Without the research, the belief was that the institution would turn into a skills training college. Recognition of this view sits uncomfortably with the Quality Audit process which is Teaching-led, thus distracting Academics from their main focus. University teaching was viewed as dependent on research. However, all staff groups supported a “*Research-Intensive*” institution, while rejecting a “*Research-Led*” one.

#### 9.2.5 Mature Students

In contrast to Academic staff, the student participants’ data showed all, without exception, understood the primary purpose of a university, any university, to be

teaching. The students, acknowledging the interdependency (supporting Jaspers, 1960), viewed it from the reverse angle to A's quote, stressing the reliance of research on teaching for its focus, guidance and drive. The student data placed knowledge transfer second and used it as a justification for the investment of public funds in HE. Research was seen by some as playing an underpinning role in teaching.

Overall Academic A's observation is clearly supported:

*"in this respect [university purpose] there's a mismatch between what the students think and what the staff think the priorities are."*

Students also referred to a belief, prior to arrival, that there would be social and career networking opportunities at university, (in particular, at Ancients) striking chords with Scott's (1995) description of the university in the middle ages creating a school for the social elite (Chapter 3). They equated "Ancients" with prestige and with higher social classes, providing opportunities to network with international students and breaking down class barriers, flattening out hierarchies ingrained by birth. One example is *Lesley* who arrived, with her husband, after being guided to the study university by a "firebrand" of a teacher on the basis that this was where they would make the networks to function better in their lives. *Lesley* thought this particularly important for her since she wanted to work in Human Rights when qualified.

She was not the only participant who had a clear vision through to employment on graduation. Almost all of the Mature students under the age of 50 years viewed the course teaching as a means to an end, equipping for the world of employment.

*"I wouldn't choose to stay here if I had another option, but I need the degree...I'm doing this to get the job at the end and so I'll do whatever I have to do." (Sarah<sup>30</sup>).*

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<sup>30</sup> Where all student participants are quoted, their names have been changed. Occasionally, where other specific details have been supplied which can also identify (for example, residential address, course of study) these have also been changed to *pseudo* status.

The difference between “vocational” and “employable” was noted, identifying the courses with vocational leanings as preferable for the Mature student. The low availability of these courses in the liberal arts and pure science profile of the study university was acknowledged. Nevertheless, for many students with family commitments, pragmatism of location had outweighed the consideration and they were just hoping that the degree would make them more employable, although unable to describe in what ways (this will be explored further in Chapter 11).

*“I thought I would be a more employable commodity” (Linda)*

Already different interpretations on university purpose have begun to emerge, the significant policy implication relates to the mismatch of expectations between students and staff. It would seem that while the staff think they are offering the opportunity for students to enhance their knowledge without any inferred promise of direct application to employment, if understood by the students in this study it would have come as an unpleasant shock. The lack of Government involvement in reviewing the expectation or tackling the mismatch was commented upon by many participants, suggesting the management of expectations as a necessary core task faced by universities on a local level.

### **9.3 Expectations and Motivation**

Expectations influence outcomes; a good relationship is created from both sides having their visions of the other upheld. In my study the visualisation and behavioural expectations by staff and students of the other varied. Once again, returning to Chapter 7, the key question identified for this area:

*“Can different sub-groups of staff and students articulate what expectations they have of each other, including what benefits they expect the other to deliver and in what format?”*

### 9.3.1 Staff Expectations of Students

Governors and Managers raised business concerns about seeking to recruit Mature students, especially where there was no shortage of overall applicants to the institution.

*“The business argument of having late lifers just doesn’t stack up. The OU is for that...” (Governor F)*

*“If we are to develop a mature student programme we need separate criteria for recruitment from the school leavers.” (Governor E)*

The independent living and social experience was seen to be a crucial part of the offer by the university and, by definition, the commuting Mature student could only interact with a small part of the experience.

*“The residential experience is an important part of the [study] experience and it may be worth acknowledging that prior to admission. Students who commute will have a very different experience” (Governor C)*

*“The transport, the residences.....this is a young person’s university” (Manager I)*

This links to the “Fit” studies (Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987) and the retaining of institutional culture with a homogeneous recruitment policy. A critical influence of the Governors and Managers may be the lack of necessity for them to meet the students. In the background, the danger of stagnancy casts a threatening shadow and within the data an acceptance of the strength of diversity within a community was acknowledged by all categories, albeit reluctantly, and to a greater or lesser extent. One Academic (a biologist) offered a straightforward analogy,

*“The basic bio-systems are diverse. In-breeding leads to downfall of the systems and basic structure”.*

However, at the study institution diversity seems to have been interpreted in terms of gender, disability, socio-economic class and internationalism, while the measurement of fit, in age terms, was described repeatedly by staff as a “youthful culture”.

*“Currently, this university still aims at primarily a youthful culture regardless of whether we recruit even larger numbers of mature students. This is right, for if we specialise in providing tailored services for mature students only, it would more likely encourage a geriatric spirit within the organisation”. (Academic A)*

Although happy to have some Mature students, staff did defend the norm as the younger, residential, student but used justifications such as geographical isolation, and accepted the resultant “spirit of youth” as being at the fundamental core identity of the institution.

*“It’s as if this university is only allowing diversity in by accident, sneaking in with the mainstreamed students and keeping quiet so they don’t let on that they’re actually there. ....The outreach work.....ticks all the right boxes and let’s us feel good about ourselves” (Manager J)*

This organisational characteristic was also recognised by the student participants who, although admitting the institution’s right to uphold it, were on the whole, dissatisfied with where that placed them and wished they had known prior to arrival in order to inform choice (although the most appropriate method of imparting this information will be difficult to ensure).

*“I read that the university was highly residential before I came to university but I don’t really think the implications of this sank in. I didn’t, at any point, consider that I would end up being in what feels like 1% of the population”. (Julia)*

Policy adjustments on a local level may be indicated, not least in terms of justification and further marketing. Some staff (including all Academics) suggested changing the institutional recruitment strategy. As Academic (D) noted:

*“We bring the students from all over the world but we will consistently have immature learners if we only focus on one age group”*

If Governors and Managers were dubious that universities got the best value from Mature students, the Academics absolutely refuted this:

*“Mature students have a different perspective on life. Their interest in a subject will raise morale in a tutorial”.*

*“They are more committed. They have interest in the subject matter, not just to pass the degree but more likely to read around the subject matter, not just work the system”.*

*“They have the intellectual skills and organisational skills to compensate although others [mainstreamed students] are not getting these skills at school”.*

*“Not like others [mainstreamed students], for some of them it is like organising a school for athletes and having to teach them to run when they arrive”*

*“They talk to teaching staff in a different manner. Almost like “allies” in the class for teaching staff since they can bridge the gap between mainstreamed students and teachers, translating issues between the two”*

In relation to the final quote, Academic B commented that this had a positive influence on mainstreamed students’ retention. An additional gain was highlighted by Academic A who thought the mainstreamed students were “civilised” by being introduced to diverse opinions helping them to form new ideas on a broader, more informed, base.

Following this line of thought, a shared expectation through all three staff categories, assumed that Mature students knew that they were coming to expand their intellectual horizons and that this was the limit of the university responsibility. With reference to the “purpose” debate, the Academics generally displayed matched shrugs of unconcern on the Mature students’ lessened number of employable years. I put it to one Academic that the Mature student may equate a university study course with a better job. Surprised, she stated that it had not occurred to her for a minute that this would have been a motivation for someone arriving at university late in life. The student data would indicate that her assumption is unrealistic.

### 9.3.2 Mature Student Expectations of a Degree from an Ancient

The literature (Chapter 4) has demonstrated the impetus of students seeking something different in their lives from HE (Archer *et al*, 2003; Reay, 2002, 2003; Thombs, 1997) and categorised the motivational reasons (Britton and Baxter, 1999;

Maher, 2001; Peters, 2000; Warmington, 2003). The two broad categories were outlined as lifestyle betterment/financial rewards, and psychological benefits and the data supported these. Extending these, my data offered two additional gains expected by the students which, although they could be seen as sub-categories of the two, were highlighted as distinct; employment benefits and the gaining of an “Escape” route.

#### 9.3.2.1 Lifestyle Betterment/Financial Rewards.

Young participants (under 30 years) had the most optimistic outlook on investment versus return. Mid-Life participants (31 – 50) held the belief that the acquisition of a university degree would place them in the position to increase their income. However increasing numbers of studies highlighted in Chapter 6 doubted the validity of their expectations (Naylor *et al*, 2002; Egerton and Parry, 2001; Marks *et al*, 2000; Purcell *et al*, 2007). The Mature student literature is liberally sprinkled with the element of “risk” (Baxter and Britton, 2001; McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001). However, the participants in my study did not seem to have factored issues such as less years of employment, reluctance of graduate employers to hire mature people (Sennett, 2006), or geographical limitations into their risk calculation to any significant or consistent level (supporting Davis, 2001) nor had university recruitment information advised them of such a possibility.

*“a university degree should hopefully open up a whole range of choices for me that will give me a better lifestyle” (Janice, M-LS)*

Participants aged under 50 years were not surprised by the Government financial packages while studying, but older ones were “*staggered*” at how generous theirs were<sup>31</sup>. Those over 50 years had considerably less investment than the others but had the expectation that they would not be in the employment market again. The validity of their packages was questioned by the younger participants (and Governors and Managers) who recognised limited public funding and felt some

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<sup>31</sup> Regular inclusion would be a “fee waiver” eliminating tuition costs, free public transport, accommodation and attendance at summer schools, grants for reading materials and bursary packages.

resentment that resources could be more efficiently used by younger students who would be able to “*pay society back*”. This highlights an overall contentious, and often uncomfortable, debate as to whether those entering university later in life (post retirement) should continue their education in another setting other than the mainstream, publicly funded university system.

*“This university is a radical, but safe, individual living experience that is worth it for the young. Aimed at the 18 year old experience. There are some pluses [of a mature student place] but they don’t offset the disadvantages of taking up a young place.” (Governor F)*

A number of possible philosophical and economic justifications can be offered. There are parallels in the health service where smokers are not banned from accessing health care if they develop a smoking-related illness. It may be feasible that the benefit in lifestyle that attending university offered to these L-LS participants diminished the burden they might otherwise be on the health service (another study opportunity?). Some of the older L-LS participants talked of depression and ill-health prior to coming to university, and the resulting “*new lease of life*” (the energy relating to Sennett’s “*usefulness*” (2006). A consideration has to be the offset of elderly health care<sup>32</sup> by a university life offering an extended quality of active, independent, life for extra years.

*“If I had stayed at home and not done this course.....just potted around in the garden like an old age pensioner I would have gone right downhill and become much older than my years”. (Alex, L-LS)*

Data from both younger student and all staff categories, expressed the view that Late-life learning could, and probably should, be conducted outside of mainstream university education, some going as far as supporting an upper age limit on university mainstream access (40 – Governor F). However, with an accepted deference to seniority and societal respect for age, especially in academically vital people, a powerful counter argument was that a university education could be seen as an earned return to those who had contributed to taxes for years.

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<sup>32</sup> Average cost of elderly nursing home care, 2007, is £28,600 per annum

### 9.3.2.2 Employment Rewards

Eight of the participants (50% or 57% of those of employment age) stated that they expected “employment rewards” from a university education. This would seem consistent with the literature, especially with first generation university students (Round, 2005).

Whether linked to finances or not, my study showed that most participants under 50 expected to get a “better” job. However, defining “better” was complex. Although the link with financial reward would seem obvious (Astin, 1991) the latest news is bringing some publicised doubt into the surety of reliance on this association (Naylor *et al*, 2002; O’Leary and Sloane, 2005; Schofield, 2005). Specifically, and in addition to the financial link, the data in my study showed that participants defined “better” in terms of job security (3), and, in ideological terms, a more interesting and intellectually challenging job (3), and, finally, one which offers travel and opening up the world (2).

The Mid-life range of participants emerged as a clear sub group here, particularly in two distinct characteristics of motive: (a) their need of a mid-life change in employment terms and (b) their pragmatism in finding a solution on a local level to meet new demands. The data showed these participants to have one, or a combination of, recent life-changing events including illness and disability (2), redundancy (2), divorce (1), marriage and pregnancy (2), international relocation (1). Their life experience seemed to give them an ability to compromise readily and without regret so, for example, chose the particular university because it fitted geographically with their other commitments; childminding, not having to travel over a toll bridge to another institution.

The motivations of two other sub-groups emerged with similar, individual, distinctive features. It was surprising that the sub-classification of categories had a

broadly similar pattern to Havigurst's (1952) age classification. In general, the Young Mature student (YMS) aged 21 – 30 years, looked for direction:

*"[post application].....for the first time I felt as if I was on track and doing something worthwhile and something that was right for me". (Grant)*

The Mid-life student (M-LS) aged 31 – 50 years was at a crossroads in his/her life seeking a second career:

*"I had been told that, although all jobs would be safe for the first two years, there was potential insecurity after that". (Linda)*

while the student in Late-life (L-LS), aged 51+, nearing or post-retirement, wanted to stay vital in the world of learning for as long as possible, in denial of being viewed as an old person when they still felt mentally young.

*"I didn't want to learn guitar or yoga. I didn't want to stay in the house ironing either. I wanted to get out." (Margaret)*

The data could be sliced in differing ways. I was keen to avoid using such a crude tool as years in classifying the data, finding it difficult to believe that people would act according to what their age dictated. However, the motivations were the first classification and we could, at this point, refer to them as "Class 1 – the Drifters", "Class 2 – the Crossroads", and "Class 3 – the Interest Hungry", but the equations with age were strong.

Of course the motivational categorisation was not exact; there were exceptions to the rule. The next category crossed all age groups driven to enter university seeking an enhancement of self-worth.

### 9.3.2.3 Psychological Benefits

This category carries certain poignancy in the context of Sennett's "*Specter of Uselessness*" (2006). The acute feeling of wasting their lives in one role when they had the potential to feel more useful in another was noted by many:

*“Having drifted on from school my job title was a “Pork Pie Picker”. I had an enquiring mind and watching TV I thought there had to be more to life than this” (Eddie; YMS- Drifter)*

As already suggested, attending an ancient university, concentrating on the liberal arts and pure sciences, is not the best way to acquire direct skills training. However eleven participants referred to their university as giving an elite label to the degree and providing a sign that the holder is an accomplished person:

*“When I heard I’d got in it was different. I had felt “ordinary” before...but this university which was so difficult to get into took me. So I felt “special” suddenly.” (Sarah, YMS - Drifter)*

*“I had to come here because it was the top – the one that was absolutely ultimate. Growing up, no one would ever have thought I could go to it” (Alex, L-LS- Interest Hungry)*

The participants, knowing the over-subscription of applicants to this University (in 2005/6 session one place was available for, on average, 11 applicants), identified the acceptance to study at the university as the first validation. They could now recast themselves as actors with legitimate membership in another, as they perceived it, intellectually superior environment using the justifications of those around who were certified by society as knowledgeable.

Subsequent to admission the theme continues of these students wanting to test their intellect and have public recognition and approval for achievement in a robust format, automatically confirming their legitimate membership to an “intellectual club”. Six participants used the attainment of a degree from this University as a symbol to actively deny criticism and reinforce personal legitimacy; they cited incidents when someone had humiliated them, misjudged them, or challenged their intellectual capability and they now felt they had something to prove.

*“I wanted what people had said I could never have” (Pauline, M-LS- Crossroads)*

*“Motivation? Perhaps to prove myself to me, my colleagues, family, friends, acquaintances that I am intelligent and worthwhile”. (Linda, M-LS, Crossroads)*

Some came simply to re-invent themselves. Alex, although retired, claimed that he had always felt younger than his chronological years and refused to have others labelling him as old. He re-enacted that at University:

*“I feel like a teenager – but a bit of a biker one with tattoos!” (Alex, L-LS – Interest Hungry)*

One distinct difference was noted in the data of the Young Mature students (YMS). Four of the six students under the age of 30 held the ideological motivation of ultimate employment which would “*make a difference in the world*”. The “*difference*” was described in terms of social, environmental, scientific or medical. This philanthropic motivation was only highlighted in the YMS category but there was an admitted recognition that it was one indicator of an essential self-image and identity which also related to the concept of “*usefulness*” (Sennett, 2006).

#### 9.3.2.4 “Escape”

I suggest this category as an addition to the current literature since the data raised the precise word in a number of narratives. Although perhaps able to be categorised under “*psychological benefits*”, I believe that “*Escape*” extends further than that. While mainstreamed students were not within the scope of this study, escape from parental control may be a dominant factor in their motivations. However, the term in this data symbolised escape from an unhappy marriage; from boredom; from loneliness; from an unfulfilling life, and, for one student, from having to sit around in a stressful waiting game while a legal case evolved over years.

*“After I was 50, I came out of the forces and returned to what was now an alien society. I didn’t know my next door neighbours, there was a lack of community or trust in society. I pined for a sense of fraternity and feeling of belonging. I tried an ex servicemen’s club. This was really all civilians or older gentlemen. Didn’t find what I was looking for. A sense of camaraderie? My life felt empty. I had to escape from this “home””. (Alex, L-LS - Interest Hungry)*

Participants who highlighted “Escape” overlapped two categories (M-L and L-L/ the Crossroads and Interest Hungry) but were primarily in the age range 45+. They were looking for interest, for intellectual challenge, for something to fill their time:

*“My husband moved here. Because I am not a person to stay at home and finding a new life was not easy I decided to go to school again in the hope that the integration process will go on smoothly (Ros, M-LS- Crossroads).*

In a rejection of the “Gold Standard”, participants thought that, all university degrees could not be considered equal. While Ancients were not viewed as the only reputable institutions, nevertheless, age and history became, in their minds, linked with prestige and added-value of degree, equating with an Ancient label. Having identified the University as not only an escape route, the elitist label further validated their decision. However someone, or something, had to reaffirm this theory and, mediating between what they knew of the student, and with educational authority, convince the student that they would fit into an Ancient environment.

### 9.3.3 Supporting Influences for Students

In any exchange relationship, if the client is convinced that the product will benefit them, then there is the opportunity of a sale. The Archer and Hutchings (2000) study made the case for the “relevance connection” of HE. In the face of media publicity, parental influence (where appropriate), and/or employment mentors, at what point did a specific factor (who or what?) clinch the deal for my participants, convincing them that the chance for a better life was possible by attaining a degree from an Ancient?

#### 9.3.3.1 Political Pressure

The Young Mature students highlighted political pressure as their primary influence. They had accepted the expectation that they had the capability to go to university during their school years but had not achieved it because of unexpected events or indecision. They described the years in between leaving school and arriving belatedly at university as being years of guilt for not fulfilling the

expectations of others. Archer and Huchings (2000) alluded to middle and upper class UK society's default of a degree but the term "political pressure" is here used in a broader interpretation to group together pressure from media, school and general societal influences. This would indicate that political pressure has succeeded in placing attendance at University as a norm for these participants, replacing the elitist or exceptional position that it has had in recent decades.

In response to societal expectations, some participants justified their delayed entry until they had maturity to use the experience appropriately.

*"I wasn't ready to make that commitment until I was the age I was when I came. If I had come earlier, at 18 for example, I would have been lazy and wasted my time at the university." (Anna)*

*Sarah* did not achieve her exam passes at 18, but was shocked to discover that she was immediately "dropped" by her social circle of school friends and heard no more from them. She eventually returned to college to gain the passes she needed to get to university and fulfil the expectations of those around her.

#### 9.3.3.2 Family

Family influence was supportive to all the Mature students in the young age classification (*Drifters*). All were particularly pleased that their selected institution, deemed by them to be highly reputable, had agreed to take them:

*"It was old therefore my mum thought it was good" (Anna)*

*Grant* described "losing his way", taking almost 12 years to rediscover his "rightful" direction after school, viewing university as the mechanism by which he could do what he wanted with his life, and delighted his family. *Lesley* chose to travel first and to go to College once she focused on her choice. However it became obvious at College that she had "the smarts" and so she felt "duty bound" and obliged to succumb to a strong family ethos of HE (highlighted by Christie *et al*, 2001).

Participants with dependents in the middle category (*M-LS, Crossroads*) believed that investment in education was for the collective, future family wellbeing, could be repaid, and in this they were supported emotionally and financially by their partners and families. Two Mothers found support from their teenage children, proud and keen that their mums should build their independent lives and balancing the time taken off parenting to study with a reaffirmation that they were strong parents, setting an example of learning to their offspring.

However the older Mature participants (*L-LS, Interest Hungry*) did not experience such support and all described the development of increasingly dysfunctional relationships. These older participants expressed lack of any sense of legitimacy from friends and family who voiced surprise and even scorn at their decision to go to university.

*“The wife asks; “why do you want to do study? What’s it going to give you?”(Alex, L-LS)*

The reasons for the lack of support were judged as ranging from rejection through jealousy to more permanent concerns of a changed discourse in the relationship which pays testament to a potential life changing effect of HE. Their partners seemed not to subscribe to the Government agenda of Lifelong learning in the 1990s, or, at least, did not expect mainstream university to be the locus for such late learners preferring it to be focused on the employment market.

*“My son was unable to finish [university]. Although he now works he hasn’t returned and I feel there might be a little bit of jealousy there. If I ever express I am having a tough time, he will gloat or appear not surprised that I can’t cope.....” (Alex, L-LS)*

The jealousy argument is perhaps an easier one to make subjectively, for the benefits of study would not be necessarily obvious to those external to or with no experience of HE. The participants claimed to have gained more than a hobby, but also “a student experience”, entering a new world with different friends, discourses, language, critical thinking. This was not choice; all these changes were seen as vital to share sense-making and thus improve the chances of success in this new

living environment. Some thought their partners recognised the potential of identity change as a result and feared a distancing from the basis of their current shared relationship (linking with Berman Brown, 2006, reporting high levels of marriage break-up). In retrospect, the participants were self-aware that university had opened up their minds and encouraged them to question everything and several commented that their partners at home found the questioning attitude a particularly annoying one to live with. Some used any opportunity as an excuse for the student to give up:

*“He says “I don’t know why you bother now – you’ll go out in the winter and get your death of cold””. (Margaret – L-LS)*

#### 9.3.3.3 Publicity

University recruitment initiatives (taster sessions, leaflets) were regarded as effective recruitment tools by the Mid-life participants. At the point at which they were seeking a change in life direction, these initiatives did bring up the HE route as a possible answer for them. The Ancient label with accompanying medieval architecture was stressed in publicity material and this was symbolised by some as an underwriting of “*stability*” (although it could have been read as signifying “old” and stale”). However the league tables were noted only as a default monitor, highlighted by only two participants as a confirmation of the institutional elite stance:

*“You get used to the same names coming up at the top and the Ancients are usually there or thereabouts. It would be funny if they weren’t.” (Wendy)*

#### 9.3.3.4 Personal Contacts

Seven of the participants described mentors in their previous environment who channelled them towards university as an appropriate route for fulfilment. In the young category, Further Education (FE) college teachers were recommended as important channels, often featuring alumni who harboured an identity bonding with their “*Alma Mater*”.

In the older participants, chance meetings with members of staff (*Nigel, Alex*) and ex-students (*Anna*) at a critical point of dissatisfaction with their lives, offered them a portrayal of the institution into which they could vision themselves:

*“My choice of [institution] was virtually haphazard on a trip here to walk the dog but a fruitful encounter with the Admissions Officer, [name]. But for the university having such affable and welcoming staff I would probably have not bothered taking it any further”. (Nigel)*

A common theme was that the personal recommendation from someone within the institution stating that they are worthy of the institution can be vital for these students, their wish to join being thus legitimised.

The decision to join HE must take into account a vision of what the culture will be. In all participants’ data, the current political and philosophical arena of HE was referred to, giving an insight to their understanding of the experience on the receiving end of the tensions within that arena.

#### **9.4 Political and Philosophical Tensions**

While recognising that this is a vast area to consider, it would not be right to ignore the data evidencing that the participants, staff and students, were all acutely aware of the current tensions in the HE sector. The Chapter 7 question governing this section was broad, covering wide areas of tension, and explored how the participants experienced the effects of these:

*“In understanding Ancients’ context, how do participants understand the political agenda facing universities today and how does this affect their expectation of how they will be received?”*

The data revealed experiences prompting views on the tensions which have been categorised here under three broad headings, broadly representing the three key debates: Academic Standards, Managerialism, and Inclusion.

#### 9.4.1 Academic Standards

There was a surprising level of shared agreement on the tensions in this area between the staff and student participants. All wanted to retain the value of the end product, *i.e.* a degree, by rejecting any consideration of “*softening*” the format of delivery. The Mature students were determined that they would not claim academic allowances and, indeed, this was borne out by the Academics. Once again, without exception, the participants did not subscribe to Eustace’s Gold Standard (1991) as a realistic representation of HE in Britain today. Many felt the expansion of universities had led to a hidden, and unfair, stratification of the Scottish HE sector and called for an open sub-categorisation of the sector with transparent, pre-set criteria which would allow institutional strengths and appropriate focus according to individual institutional structures. Whilst most rejected the sector being divided into extremely narrow specialist universities they did support a wider streaming design, and all groups, even students, seemed to prefer the pre-1992 structure of the HE sector to the current day.

*“The government has indirectly turned many HE institutions into a small Open Universities. This was a poor decision, seeing the mainstreaming of all diversity as losing an opportunity for specialism. It would have spared some, perhaps many, universities from the threats to their standards.” (Academic A)*

Staff participants, unsurprisingly, defended the institution as a meritocracy with strict standards, resisting perceived attacks on standards:

*“The introduction of diversity can lead to the neutralising of admission standards”. (Academic A)*

*“They must have the standard of the degree maintained or the degree worth is spoiled for every student” (Governor C)*

*“...we beat our heads over being elitist.....but a meritocracy is excellent” (Manager J)*

The last quote came from one manager, but, in general, Managers were more open to recognising the need to “*level the playing fields*” for non-traditional students with limited access to education in the mainstreamed format (Thomas, 2001; Woodward,

2000: Chapter 6). Since many of the Managers originated from working class backgrounds and comprehensive education, they remained unconvinced that poor intellectual stamina was a critical problem for educational access. In contrast, however, Academics and Governors had little patience with the view of unequal access to basic education as a justification for under-achievement. This was one of many areas where Managers fundamentally differed from the other two staff groups, as they grappled with the external stakeholders' interests, the accountability to society, introducing business targets to an organisation fundamentally based on centuries of honour codes and independence.

#### 9.4.2 Managerialism

The introduction of the business culture in universities coming to challenge the "Dons" was accepted, grudgingly, as a necessary evil. However identification of accountability varied according to the role profile of the participant. The Governors described a global accountability for world betterment (researching climate change, Middle East peace talks, etc.). The Managers focused on local issues, examining direct conflicts with the Scottish Executive and local regional planning authorities and were increasingly considering opportunities to raid the public and commercial purses. Academics interpreted accountability to mean accountability to their discipline, internally to the department or externally to colleagues in their discipline on an international basis.

Funding Councils were accused by Governors and Managers of mishandling the promotion of the wider access agenda in a rigidly applied framework disallowing for local profiles:

*"The accountability ticket is being played so hard that it is perhaps unworthy of our attention on occasions. They must have local application....we cannot all be found accountable by the same measure for local conditions disallow for direct comparison....." (Manager H)*

The Scottish Executive's use of retention rates as a performance indicator for public funding calculations was seen as giving ambiguous messages. The wider the

inclusion, the greater the external responsibilities and the participants' emphatic belief was that attrition rates would necessarily be increased no matter what adjustments were made institutionally. However, although ancient institutions were rewarded for having tight retention rates, the more inclusive, modern universities in cities were penalised for higher attrition rates. In real terms this acted as a dissuader from actively embracing the diverse agenda, especially in an institution where applications are over-subscribed:

*“The primary purpose of the institution has to be remembered.....The SFC can use naïve analysis to assess abilities of institutions to encourage and sustain wider access students” (Governor C).*

There was also an increasing concern amongst Managers that the Government was beginning to dictate areas of delivery for which it is not paying directly, an increasing situation in Ancients with access to alternative funding sources.

*“The filling in the forms makes it debatable as to whether the exercise is worthwhile” (Manager I)*

Managers described struggling with the dilemma of losing unnecessary administrative time applying for small amounts of cash, but risking the bad publicity with the funding council for not attempting to claim. Some staff interpreted this as being insulted by the Government who did not “*trust*” the professionalism of the Academic community (and supporting arguments that mechanical accountability is undermining trust in the current environment [O'Neill, 2002]).

The data evidence from the students on this debate surrounded the concept of Academic Freedom which some volunteered they found a dubious concept (mirrored by a few of the Managers). In direct contrast to Meztger's (1955) view, five students saw it as no longer valid in a society becoming increasingly and legislatively accountable for its behaviour, its language and its norms. They

perceived academics to be slow to realise the political correctness lobby influence over research agendas and behaviour of academic teachers. The caution of considering the definition of academic freedom in line with societal expectations was viewed as a helpful factor in the future harmony of the institution.

*“Tutors have to learn that they can’t get away with everything they want their way.” (Lesley, YMS - Drifter)*

*“Academic Freedom is used as an excuse for non-production” (Manager J)*

This would seem to be an interesting note for policy awareness in future, given that the staff data still preserved the lack of accountability in this area as sacrosanct and my feeling is that they would be surprised to find the students’ contrasting views. It could be that this is an example of where the students had not fully accepted the academic norms yet but would grow into it as they progressed through university. Alternatively it could be an example where an internal culture is now clashing with an external societal expectation of accountability to society in all things.

If the academic freedom represents autonomous decision making, possibly the area of greatest tension currently is the government agenda dictating the membership in profile and numbers. So it was not surprising that the data revealed “Inclusion” to be the area about which most people had a view.

#### 9.4.3 Inclusion

Rather than a focus on white, able-bodied or high socio-economic groups for their recruitment, the student participants identified the core recruitment as one of young, direct school-leavers. This was the “In-Group” and a youth culture had developed at the heart of the institution.

The student participants, in response to the university publicity material, had the impression that they were joining a community into which they would “fit” (supporting fit studies; Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987) with the defining

characteristic being the “study” role. However tensions around lifestyles and behavioural norms were experienced, especially with the Young, Mature students (Drifters). They were unhappy with, what they considered, quite deliberate positioning of them on the periphery because of the particularly tight focus on 18 - 20 year old entrants. They found little to do socially if not part of the “teenage, drinking culture”.

*I didn't feel the need to go out every night get stupidly drunk and talk about the new-found freedom of just moving out of home and escaping the watchful eyes of my parents..... I have the feeling that I am a little bit of a loner in the masses of students.” (Anna)*

*Because of our age .....I, for one, and I do think I speak for the rest of the group..... do not feel like a “fresher” and do attempt to distance myself from them. (Lesley)*

Lesley’s last quote is interesting in that there is an inference that the Mature students make a definite decision to distance themselves and place themselves on the periphery. However other students in this group denied this, having tried to be integrated on many occasions and having felt rejected.

In inclusive terms, the staff wished not to appear “precious” about their culture and most interviewed volunteered that there were aspects to it that required adaptation to meet modern student profile demands. However age was one defining characteristic about which they seemed few proactive adjustments. In age terms, unapologetic Managers and Governors aimed the university at the young, residential market and the Academics accepted it. Most considered the focus an unavoidable consequence of structures, e.g. geographical location of the university in a rural area with high housing costs and poor transport links and expensive childcare. Whilst this may seem inarguable, Bamber & Tett (1999) do just that by cautioning that emphasising the structures, we minimise the individual agency, and by taking such a line it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; the individual does have less agency.

All staff participant groups produced justifications of the recruitment target of the young by identifying it as the institutional identity and expressed resentment at any attempt by the Government to “*erode*” this. The majority acknowledged the institution’s commitment to excellence, but read this in academic terms only. They rejected, on philosophical and moral grounds, the manipulation of that excellence by Government to rank higher on, for example, social demographic variables of national benchmarking or to be developed at a pace and in a format dictated by the Government. Once again we are reminded by Bamber & Tett (1999) that universities have their own idea of equity which reflect what they have justified as *acceptable*, although this could also be interpreted as *ideological*.

Although the Government argues that the HE sector can take more into the system (Futureskills Scotland, 2006), the consensus by staff participants was that the HE sector was over-recruiting, leading to skill shortages and students being encouraged into major debt, with difficulties of payback. Some participants sought an open debate on the subject to challenge the Government to answer criticisms that its agenda may, cynically, be shading hidden statistics in unemployment and encouraging lifelong debt (supporting Egerton and Parry, 2001). Some staff expressed discomfort that they may be colluding with an agenda which could satisfy the Government but lead people into future financial misery.

*“Government is defrauding [students].....HE is a lot of money to spend with not much to show in terms of direct increased earnings or employability”*  
(Governor F)

The academics confessed astonishment at Governmental demands. Signals of change coming from the Managers were suspected immediately by Academics as a potential infringement of their academic freedom and with that suspicion came resentment.

## 9.5 Key Findings

In Chapter 1, I suggested some areas of debate surrounding the first stage of the student-university interaction. I also outlined the literature on the research in this area in Chapter 4. Now I start to draw together the key findings of my own study in this chapter to add to that literature, highlighting where they consolidate earlier studies, on occasions extending, or refuting, previous findings.

In this first stage of the student journey, one fundamental finding emerged which provides a possible framework for the analysis to come. By applying motivational criteria, the applicability of an *adjusted* Havigurst (1955) classification, dividing the student participants into three groups, showed its relevance for data organisation; the Young Mature student (YMS), aged 21 – 30 years, the Mid-Life Mature student (M-LS), aged 31 – 50 years and the Late-Life Mature student (L-LS), aged 51 years and over. In Chapter 1 I had aimed to use motivation as a means of categorising students since it seemed that the root of success or failure of an experience lies in the reasons people come in the first place. In spite of the age classification being crude and perhaps limiting, it will be further tested through criteria in further stages of the student journey, acknowledging that it cannot be an exact method.

Some other main findings from this chapter are summarised as relevant to the key issues of Purpose, Expectations and Tensions:

### 9.5.1 Purpose

#### 9.5.1.1 University purpose: staff / student mismatch 1

Staff seem distinctly grouped in their understanding of purpose: Societal Change (Governors), Teaching (Management) and Research (Academics). Students together shared an understanding of the university primary purpose as Teaching with Knowledge Transfer as their second choice. This identifies a fundamental mismatch therefore between staff and students' understandings of purpose. While

staff do not seem to live with a conscious accountability to society, the student participants viewed universities to be inarguably public bodies with accompanying accountability.

#### 9.5.1.2 University, a precursor for employment: staff / student mismatch 2

All three staff groups agreed that it was not the job of a university to equip people directly for employment. However, the less direct label of “employable” (as opposed to “vocational”) could be a positive aim aligned to university philosophical beliefs. In contrast, the majority of students (under 50 years) had, at point of entry, believed, that a direct offer of employment would be, if not guaranteed, then expected, and university-facilitated, upon graduation. The staff viewpoint aligns with Newman (1860) while clashing with the students’ expectations which follow the line of the government literature. This carries clear policy implications.

#### 9.5.1.3 “Ideology” : additional university purpose

The YMS participants offered an additional purpose of universities to nurture ideological dreams. I would suggest that these participants had the youth to dream, but the life experience to draw their focus external to themselves, placing them in a distinct position to mainstreamed or other Mature students. It should be stressed that the motive of ideology was expressed as an outward-facing, philanthropic, force and is separate from the personal, internal ambitions of, for example, Sennett’s “usefulness” (2006).

#### 9.5.1.4 The place of research

The distinction was made by my academic and management staff participants between the preferable “Research-Intensive” rather than “Research-Led”. I would suggest this reflects a more recent acceptance, even within an Ancient, of the importance of the teaching role. However all participants recognised the importance of research to the Ancients, thus confirming the literature of some of the more

recent educational researchers in the area (Henkel, 1997; Tapper, 2000; Tapper & Salter, 2004; Neave, 2006).

#### 9.5.1.5 Acceptance of “Good Individuals”, but rejection of a “Good Society”.

A distinction was emphasised between creating “good individuals” and a “good society”. With the exception of the Governors, neither staff nor students viewed the latter as the university’s responsibility. I have linked this to the Foucauldian literature emphasising the use of universities and playing down the agency of the individual student although, in this respect, the data from the staff in my study takes a view more in line with Norris (2001). Staff recognised the freedom of the individual to use their knowledge in whatever way they chose.

#### 9.5.1.6 Universities rely on an interdependency of purposes

All staff acknowledged an interdependency of purposes and gave direct examples in the interviews which consolidated Jasper’s (1960) claim. Specialised institutions were, broadly, rejected as a concept although I sensed some staff sympathy to Halsey’s (1987) suggestion of universities for the scholarly few, but HE, in its broadest sense, pluralistically funded, for everyone.

### 9.5.2 Expectations:

#### 9.5.2.1 The addition of a student motivational category: “Escape”

Considering individual motivations for engaging with HE, the diverse student literature has principally offered political pressure, financial and employment rewards and self-improvement (Archer, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2001; Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Connor, 2001). In addition to these categories, one of “Escape” was added by my students; escape from an unhappy marriage; from boredom; from loneliness; from unfulfilling employment.

#### 9.5.2.2 The “Ancient” status heavily influenced recruitment

The age of the institution was viewed as a key factor for all students and for staff also; there was a heavy expectation of gravitas of delivery and value of degree from an Ancient. My participants had believed in the material which put strong emphasis on the elitism of an Ancient title, not consciously identifying it as “marketing” material as such but perhaps giving consideration to Ellis’s (1994) description of the “Oxbridge Conspiracy”.

#### 9.5.2.3 A university mentor at point of application is essential

Influences to encourage applicants to see HE as offering an answer to their discontent included those already highlighted in the literature, but my study added a specific personal “mentor”, a figure who had previous knowledge of the university, usually in an educational setting. This is reminiscent of the literature focusing on the early development of the European universities describing scholars who acted as intellectual mentors and attracted students to join them in their studies (Brock, 1998; Shinn, 1986). However the participants’ descriptions of their mentors also revealed their role as bridges between the participants’ current and future self-image, identifying it as fitting for them to attend an Ancient, overcoming a barrier identified extensively in the literature (Egerton, 2001; Forsyth & Furlong, 2000; Whitehead *et al*, 2006).

#### 9.5.2.4 Post-admission, students quickly defended the academic elitism

Further to Ellis’s discussion, once in the institution, students expected the opportunity within an Ancient to create social networks which would minimise class divides. The students were pleased to associate themselves with the “elite” title in terms of academic standards and, having been admitted to this group, they were not in favour of anything which relaxed restrictions, thus reducing their achievement to date.

#### 9.5.2.5 The student participants' beliefs of education fit well with the philosophy of academic staff

The Academics found Mature students the best group of students to work with, and expected them to bring focus and organisational skills acting as a bridge between them and mainstreamed students. Underpinning the philosophical belief of academic excellence, in an Ancient where the focus is on intellectual scholarship, Mature students were seen to be the personification of a search for knowledge. As such, Mature students are seen to be exempt from the Crisis Theorists' claims of standard threats.

### 9.5.3 Tensions

#### 9.5.3.1 Areas of agreement between staff and student participants

Wagner's (1995) "academic rigour" was stated as a core belief for all participants, staff and students. Additionally, supporting Eustace (1991) all participants rejected the concept of the UK's "Gold Standard" and shared the opinion that the 1992 expansion, operated in the single format as it had been in Scotland, had been a mistake. Further, and in contrast to the Government and QAA literature, all staff participants held the belief that the current Government monitoring methods were naïve and gave unreliable readings of the actual activity in universities. There was a call for consideration of a transparent classification of the HE sector in Scotland, encouraging and supporting individual institution's strengths of focus.

#### 9.5.3.2 Structural barriers - evidenced by student participants

Student participants, considering they were fully and actively joining a community, without exception found it to have structural barriers (Giddens, 1976; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Participants claimed the systems were aimed at processing young, residential students, were inflexible and had difficulty coping with varied needs of Mature students. The infrastructure for commuting students was particularly poor. Although committed to diversity, the staff recognised these

structural barriers and, in defending the institutional identity, directed the solution to transparency prior to arrival to inform student institutional choice. When taken to a specific level, staff were resolute in maintaining the status quo when asked how comfortable they were in advertising that Mature students would have to embrace the “spirit of youth”. I was unable to find literature examining commuters to residential institutions but this study is offered as a start.

#### 9.5.3.3 Student participants fail to uphold “absolute” Academic Freedom

There was a tolerance and, for some, a belief of absolute academic freedom amongst the staff, supporting the plea of Metzger (1955) to protect the concept in research institutions. However student participants held the opposing view, seeing the concept as no longer absolute. To them, the “freedom” was something which necessarily, for societal harmony, had to be limited. Mirroring the observations of the 1990s literature (Becher, 2001: Moodie, 1991: Trow, 1991) the students still perceived the academic community as unable to deal with the concept of accountability today.

These summarised findings consider the early stages; the motivation to join, expectations of and sense of purpose of an Ancient. The findings are temporarily set aside, but will be returned to later, and I now go on to explore the stage post-admission where an interaction between the two parties, student and university, is developed. The adjusted Havigurst classification (1952) has, at this stage, shown itself to be, broadly speaking, a comfortable fit with the differing attitudes of sub groups of the student participants, although the labelling (Drifters etc.) requires review. Judging the appropriateness of this classification in the themes emerging through the ongoing daily lives of these Mature students is an interesting challenge.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Merging of Student and University – Making Connections**

#### *During the Interaction*

#### **10.1 Introduction**

This chapter tracks the second stage of the Mature student life cycle, exploring daily life as the Mature students are influenced by, and focus on, the balancing of external and internal interests (Bamber and Tett, 2001). The Mature student experience is adapted as their interactions with mainstreamed students, other Mature students, staff and institutional systems construct their interpretation of what is going on around them and where they should position themselves within that action.

#### **10.2 Developing Identity: Self-Definition**

In Chapter 7 the theoretical literature focusing on identity was developed into the following question:

*“How does the Mature student identity start to develop and how much agency is experienced during this process?”*

Taking a Social Constructionist view of identity as an entity which is far from fixed, in a constant fluid state and moulded by social interactions on arrival, most of the participants began by feeling “*special*” at having been accepted on their degree course.

*“I was surprised that such a prestigious establishment saw past my age and gave me the chance to study. I came to St Andrews as a highly motivated student who felt he had the world at his feet.” (Grant, YMS)*

*“I couldn’t believe it. I have got the chance to do it and that people believed in me. (Pauline, M-LS)*

However they quickly had to recast themselves, their confidence knocked within the first few weeks of entering the university when faced with younger school leavers displaying apparent “*confidence*” and “*self-righteousness*”.

*“I was used to mixing with people of all ages as I had travelled around in the hotel trade. But I did not feel the huge age gap that I felt with new undergrads.” (Anna, YMS)*

*“I noticed most of them saw me as a bit old to hang about with them. I moved back home after a month” (Eddie, YMS)*

This registered the starting point for Mature students to be positioned or to position themselves as peripheral to what they saw as the main student experience, developing a vulnerability (identified by Murphy and Roopchand [2003] in relation to females).

The enforcement of conformity within labelled groupings implies that, once inside the door and accepted as part of the “In-Group” (if defined as the “University”) the particular diversity of the individual participant becomes less important than the fact that he/she is a fellow member of the “In-Group” (Sherif, 1961; Tajfel, 1981).

*“I feel in terms of social integration that [the university] is much like the forces – it takes some time to be accepted but once you’re in, you’re in.” (Alex, L-LS)*

Unsurprisingly, the student participants further along the study journey felt more identification with the institution, had adopted its values and defended its normative stance. However, taking the contrasting view, if Chatman (1989) is heeded, then those who had not shared the same belief system as the institution would have left already, leaving the remained as the more homogeneous group (Blaxter and Tight, 1993; Waller, 2006).

As is the case in the last chapter, the age categorisation continued to prove a relevant classification. The Young (YMS) participants described having difficulty with what they perceived as a clash between their identity of themselves as young, and the institutional systems and culture which, in effect, defined them as not young enough. In the Mid-life (M-LS) range, the predominance of females was marked (five out of six), which may support Marks’ (2000) “Breadwinner Ideology” by

highlighting a reluctance to participate by male breadwinners having to relinquish their salary to return to unpaid study. All the women in this category had financial support from a male partner. The economic issue is not the only consideration here with consideration of the psychological identity of someone giving up the breadwinner/provider mentality, to become someone who perhaps relies, subordinately, on other family members to subsidise him. This had been an issue for *Harry* but was not further evidenced in this study.

The majority of student participants voiced their sense of gratitude at being given the opportunity to study and combined this with their cultural beliefs identified by some as “*respecting authority, maintaining independence, abiding by the rules*”. The sense of indebtedness stemming from such gratitude led to some perceptions of lack of agency being expressed, indicating they would be unlikely to challenge institutional cultures or argue for increased service provision:

*“The first time I went up to use reference books and type up some text I felt guilty about using a PC when there was a queue waiting to use one. I had to rationalise the situation and tell myself that I did indeed belong here, just as much as everyone else” (Linda, M-LS)*

Although the participants had previously taken part in standard questionnaires for the institution, the interviews for this study provided the first occasion for many of them where their opinions were being actively sought. The data identified shared understandings in personal strategies using either avoidance or withdrawal when faced with obstacles in the organisational systems. If the participants came across cultural expectations which were at odds with their own, they would withdraw from a confrontation situation, back out (usually apologising in the process) and find another route or abandon and amend their original plan. By doing so, they reinforced their own lack of agency, increasing the legitimacy of the institutional structure to dictate its functionality. However, in Chapter 11 the ultimate confrontation will be examined in terms of retention or withdrawal.

### 10.3 Integration

The data identified two strands worthy of exploration which are also drawn out in the literature. The first examines the level of integration sought by the participants; while the other examines the Mature students beliefs which are shared, or not, with mainstreamed students. The Chapter 7 question directing this line of focus is:

*“Do Mature students prioritise mainstream networking opportunities as important for a better experience, or do they place themselves as peripheral to the mainstreamed social life?”*

#### 10.3.1 How Important is Social Integration?

University publicity describes student life as one great fun opportunity to live in a community of like-minded people, studying and socialising together. Within the data, a specific age range (the M-L category) held the primary aim of degree attainment and expressed neither a wish to, nor a disappointment at not being able to, engage socially with mainstreamed students. Commuting home at night, they viewed university as a “day job”, while the real social life was at home with the family and the social circle. The participants indicated that they were happy and successful at engaging with mainstreamed students in academic, but not so much social, matters. Thus, it appeared that they positioned themselves, choosing to place themselves on the periphery:

*“I have one good friend that I met in second week. Apart from that I am worlds apart from a lot of the students. But then, I have never really had a great desire to fit in.” (Pauline – M-LS)*

*“Although I’m happy to be friendly with the other younger students, and we chat about work, I choose not to get involved socially. I don’t want to join into a youth culture. If I was out socialising with the younger students, I’d just be thinking about my wife and children and thinking I should be there with them.” (Grant; YMS)*

Orientation programmes in Ancients aim to facilitate the development of the, what Connell and Wellborn (1991) call, “a concept of belongingness” and Tett (2002) has reminded us of the particular need to make an extra effort to include non-

traditional students into the ancient cultures. Considerable policy implementation has been directed at facilitating social integration for peripheral students, with data from this study indicating Governors and Academics interest in persuading people to mix with imposed internal social engineering by design of class formation and induction opportunities. However this approach of the M-LS participants supported another non-traditional study of Duquette (2000), who found that the importance of social integration in the university setting was played down by disabled students and their relationship with the university was limited to one of what Kember (1995) further described as “connection”. It would appear, with M-LS participants anyway, that energy focusing on enabling social integration may be resources ill-spent, overlooking levels of individual agency central to the very process of integration.

The structures barring extra-curricular participation were identified by the participants as three-fold: personal responsibilities (for example, families), transport (further examined in section 10.6.2), and lack of an accommodation base in town leading to financial pressures (the “hanging around” in expensive coffee bars in town between lectures and after hours was not welcomed).

However another barrier, not specifically identified but referred to, surrounded self-image and confidence (examined in Chapter 11) rather than practicalities:

*“Every year I am full of good intentions. I take all the leaflets. Then I get cold feet. I feel uncomfortable to play sport with people much younger than me. I don’t feel as fit as them. But I don’t have time for it anyway. Then at the end of the year I always regret that I didn’t do it”. (Pauline – M-LS)*

Although the M-LS participants were simply not interested, preferring to retain their social identity at their home base, the other two groups had a more complex approach to social integration. The Late-life students had no expectation of it happening, but were delighted when it unexpectedly did. The YMS participants were, on the whole, keen to be fully involved with activities alongside

mainstreamed students but found the similarities in core beliefs few and far between, thus experiencing rejection. These are worthy of further examination.

### 10.3.2 Perceptions of Mainstreamed Students

One YMS participant noted that those who had been on the Access summer school (nine participants in the study) had no opportunity to meet the mainstreamed younger students until they started the main programme and so had established their initial expectations of how a mainstream student at that institution would look, behave and what they would believe in, without ever having met one. The Evening Degree programme students (two participants) had no reason, and little opportunity, to meet the day students at all, with even their use of the library being at quiet times.

Having had an interaction with a mainstreamed student a common interpretation from that encounter was one of feeling “*an oddity*” based on age. The lack of congruence was, perhaps surprisingly, emphasised the closer the age gap with the mainstreamed students. All of the YMS participants (six) individually commented on “*feeling left out*”, being treated “*strangely*” and feeling “*lonely*” expressing unfulfilled expectations of shared beliefs and norms with the mainstreamed students who “*are, after all, a similar age group*”. Many of the YMS participants expressed their anticipation of sharing similar values to the mainstreamed students but were disappointed. Unexpectedly, the “*sphere of action*” (Beech *et al*, 2002) was defined by age and they were placed by others on the periphery. Some participants pushed the issue by being openly willing to engage socially and yet found mainstreamed students unwilling to reciprocate:

*“On one occasion a group of female students asked me out for a drink. Then they found out I was married. They dropped the invitation and just ignored me after that.” (Lesley; YMS)*

Recounted in the journals was the forced repositioning of the person’s identity into that of an “old” persona viewed comparatively by others, even if having arrived

feeling relatively young to their, then, external social groups. *Katerina (YMS)* noted in her journal:

*“Meeting new people -  
Within all the First Years I feel very lost  
In the PC room it is only quiet from 7 – 10 in the morning otherwise there are  
always students giggling around. I feel like being back at school.”*

The differences were noted specifically in terms of behaviours and norms. Observed “Lack of Respect” was reiterated in a number of journals, the YMS participants being the most critical. Having arrived expecting their belief system to be on a par with the mainstreamed students, several found, in comparison, the mainstreamed students were “unmannerly” and “disrespectful”:

*“I have noticed that no one seems to have any manners around here. ‘Please’, ‘Thanks’ and ‘I’m sorry’, seem to exist only rarely...I’ve never experienced anything quite like it and I’m not sure where it’s coming from.” (Anna; YMS)*

From a social constructionist perspective, the disrespect was not age specific. Assumptions of a societal norm of respect for elders within British society would seem to be questionable and the institution is international. However, it was resented by the YMS group and a further reminder of the lack of congruence.

Given their declared disinterest in integration, the M-LS participants also noted the differences, but instead of resentment it was met with some amusement:

*“I feel that I can’t read “Hello” or “Now” in the coffee shop. Must invest in a small book with Chekov on the front, and paste gossip column trash inside so that people think I am a student. Also, must invest in a pashmina and a pair of flip-flops to wear in all kinds of weather”. (Linda; M-LS)*

Participants over 50 years had little expectations of any similarity and, perhaps as a consequence, demonstrated more acceptance of difference. They found mainstreamed students accepted them as being unusual, valued them for their eccentricities, and the positioning with respect was reciprocated:

*“The youngsters on the course are friendly and chat. Even if they say immature things or stuff that is “off the wall”, it’s important to let them have their opinion. (Margaret; L-LS)*

Relationships flourished between the two; one post-retiral man described the pleasure the mainstreamed students took in teaching him “new tricks”:

*“I love music – from New Age to Jazz. A young student suggested I try a new band from Finland yesterday. I went home, downloaded it and agreed with her – it was just the sort of music I enjoy!” (Alex; L-LS)*

An academic who was also a Warden emphasised the benefits for mainstreamed students to be integrated with Mature ones and also outlined the benefits for the institution:

*“I find that my community knits together better when age stratification is present.”*

A caution came, however, not to be presumptuous in viewing the age categorisation as the prominent factor:

*In Scottish History I felt different – and this was unusual for me. I thought it must be the first time because I was Mature, but then I realised in a truly international group, I was the only Scottish one” (Margaret; L-LS)*

It is important to note the formal adoption of the age classification, given that the motivational criteria shared relevance with that of integration. The YMS (Drifters) group now became those having difficulty integrating and reported to be the loneliest; the L-LS (Interest Hungry) enjoyed being appreciated for their eccentricity, while the M-MS (Crossroads) had no interest in social integration. The age classification has held well through a number of these different themes and so, with a crucial reminder that the presence of overlapping examples leaves it far from exact, nevertheless an important contribution of this study could be the recognition of three distinct Mature student groups. Since there could be a value judgement interpretation attached to the category names, from this point on I shall refer in terms of the initials only.

#### 10.4 “Fit”: Identifying Peers

If not the mainstream, who did the groups identify with? With reference to the primary question of Chapter 7:

*“Even if the Mature students are of different ages, are there common characteristics which infer that “Fit” has been established and that a peer group has been found?”*

The whole area of “peers” requires the definition of identity by the participant. Participants’ original attempts (mostly YMS) to reach out to the wider “Mature student” body within an organised framework (for example, through Mature Student Society Cheese and Wines) did not succeed. Going along to organised society events did not help to identify peers:

*“I tried to join some clubs when I arrived, but I either felt too old for the other freshers or I felt the right age, but everyone else was in third or fourth year. I’m an anomaly” (Sarah, YMS)*

The majority concluded that the term “Mature” incorporated too wide an age range with too many identities under the term to constitute one unit.

*“Mature Students’ Soc is full of much older people who I don’t think like me very much (they seem to dislike anyone under the age of 30).” (Lesley, YMS)*

Mature and mainstreamed students could, hypothetically, share some similar experiences given that both are in transition phases of their lives. It could be argued that a fundamental function of university is to develop independence in a new role, although with different triggers:

*“University was the first step into the outside world after my accident; it offered a half-way house to independence.” (Nigel; M-LS)*

One participant highlighted another similarity in the changing relationship between the student and their family members which they are, to some extent, leaving

behind and entering into a world to which they must adapt their beliefs, their thought processes, and their discourses. These similarities could be used by teachers to respond to non-traditional students by markedly ignoring their differences.

However, the differences were prioritised by the participants:

*“the culture is one of heavy drinking. I meet people who have the main conversation of being proud of not having thrown up over the weekend.” (Anna YMS)*

Strategies for coping with the differences included the participants identifying peers in the very early stages and maintaining loyalty to them thereafter. What was interesting was that they were approximately in a similar age band according to the three-way classification of this study:

*“I’ve met one or two people my age and we all stick together feeling a bit like a third leg sometimes” (Sarah; YMS)*

*“Although I’m a bit of an extrovert, I have stuck with friends I met at the beginning, all aged 20s to early 40s” (Eddie; YMS)*

Although not interested in socialising, the M-LS group identified their seeking of an academic peer group. Along with those in L-LS category (51+) who showed eagerness to meet new interesting people, both sets drew a common theme; that of identifying academic staff and postgraduate tutors as potential social peers. As they progressed through university, they assumed the seeking out of these staff members, inviting them into a social setting, with the motive always one of gaining academic information or advice, but viewing these academics, increasingly, as people in their “In-Group” membership criteria based on shared academic interests.

A temporary peer group was constructed for some in the specialist programmes, for example, the Access Summer School and the Part-time Evening degree programme. Similar initiatives have been researched (Connell and Chakrabarti, 1999; Hall, 1998; Osborne *et al*, 1997; Walker, 2000) showing the creation of a group sharing an alternative entry route and with similar background profile. The students were

conscious of the opportunity to create their own subculture, joining with similar experiences and with identified shared values and understandings about HE at the point of entry.

In the case of the Access Summer School, however, the students eventually had to join the mainstream. Three participants, having gained benefits from the initiative, noted that it also raised expectations of unsustainable individual tutor attention and close relationships with other Mature students which made initial adjustment awkward once mainstreaming started. The realigning of their identities had to take place twice. They claimed they would have welcomed continuing institutional support for a few weeks after entering the mainstreamed programme:

*“... [I was] excited and enjoyed the summer school. However when I went into the mainstreamed Orientation week it was very different. I found I had little in common with anyone else and I felt out of it.” (Anna; YMS)*

The data produced a subtle distinction at this point: although specialised *institutions* were rejected, specialised *streams* within a diverse institution were seen as allowing Mature students to share their strengths, their belief systems and their responsibilities:

*“I believe that the Summer School should continue for as far into the future as possible. I cannot praise the enterprise highly enough.” (Lesley; YMS)*

The danger of triggering stigma through tokenism could have been identified as a negative of these initiatives. However, although acknowledged, the majority of participants thought them preferable to the alternative which they described as “*social isolation*”. In social construction terms, they appreciated the opportunity to create a reality of university experience and an “In-Group” which could run parallel to the mainstream. One participant described simply that she enjoyed “*talking the same language as these people*”.

## 10.5 Discourses: An Integration Tool

Again, with reference to Chapter 7, the themes emerging from the literature on discourses raised the following question:

*“In what ways do the alternating discourses contribute to the Mature students’ experience?”*

A multi-faceted view of discourses has been adopted, combining to establish a picture of how language, and the use of it, facilitated integration or reinforced positions of particular actors in this arena. Clashes in discourses have been shown to relate to a vast range of background contextual influences; ethnicity, gender, age (Reay, 1998; Round, 2005). Even the term “student” can, in itself, be problematic if seeking definition (Waller, 2006). The participants in my study focused on two other potential areas of discourse clash which I term “life experience”, and “socio-economic class”.

Taking the first, as has been highlighted, life experience is not measured in terms of mere years:

*“Talking or making conversation is difficult at times. This might be because most people haven’t got much experience in having small talk and I found myself often running out of questions I could ask to make conversation” (Anna; YMS)*

What may be surprising about this claim is that it comes from one of the YMS group only 5 years older than an average Scottish school-leaver entrant. In her case, the 5 years difference encompassed experiences of leaving home and family, development of independent living, establishing and sustaining new friendships including an exclusive partnership, recovering from the break-up of this relationship, living distant from friends and family in another country, using a different language in that country, handling independent finances, having time to reflect on future directions, arriving in Scotland and studying at a local college in a foreign language (with the added complication of local accents). The range of challenges presented to this participant in such a short period of time developed

new skills of generational qualities. The personal growth was identified by the YMSs themselves as the source of contrast with the mainstreamed students and seemed to have resulted in the lack of a shared discourse facilitating the creation of a joint identity.

Student participants identified problems caused by an incongruity in access to the academic environment. Some commented on the importance of learning to communicate in “academic speak” before they could feel comfortable in the role of being a student. Three described this as part of the whole student *persona*, the looking, talking and acting in the manner of a student – of what one student called:

*“Walking the walk and talking the talk” (Wendy; M-LS)*

The clash in discourses also worked in other identity settings; while recognising academic discourses as useful mechanisms for bonding students, a number of participants commented on the difficulty of creating new discourses with established people at home who had no understanding of the university experience, and in some cases were opposed to it.

The constant juggling of the discourses in their alternating identities demanded what one student described as a “split personality”. *Eddie (YMS)* commuted each day and socialised with his friends, (none of whom had undertaken HE) in a neighbouring city at night.

*“Around my friends in [the city] I wear a different hat and keep the two roles very separate. They don’t talk about my student life but they do respect when I can’t do something because I’m studying” (Eddie, YMS)*

Eddie described how the gap between the two “lives” made not only the relevance limited, but also lacked a shared language or understanding in his social group. His identity adjusted accordingly with each, different, setting. *Julia (M-LS)* outlined terms she had had to learn since arrival, including “*tutorials, seminars, reading weeks,*

*deadlines, and academic parenting*". Apart from their "academic" use, such terms were interpreted as pretentious in the home environment, causing a tension and identifying dual identity. Round, (2005) in particular, saw the key to integration as lying in the harmonising of the two sets of language but this was proving problematic for most of the commuting participants. They expected the adjustment to come from the home setting, basing this assumption on the age of the institution and their voluntary engagement with its character. Although the participants, in the main, found it difficult to get anything more than benign acceptance of their student role, a policy suggestion was for the university to include families in events wherever possible to facilitate their understanding of the students' challenges and "other life".

On a positive note, *Eddie (YMS)* used the academic discourses to create a new relationship outside of the university setting. Having had a distant relationship with his estranged father, his undertaking of academic study resulted in recognition of a shared interest in science with his father. Throughout the studies, the scientific and educational discourses drew them emotionally closer.

The second background influence on discourses emerged from the data as that of socio-economic (linking in the literature to Canaan, 2006). The Mature students participating in my study came, on the whole, from less affluent backgrounds than many mainstreamed counterparts. However, some mainstreamed students demonstrated lack of understanding of their less privileged world external to the university setting. A sense of alienation was expressed:

*"I was in a pub when some 'high class' students were having what they called "a single mums' party". They were holding plastic dolls and dressed up as 'chavs' in the 'ned' culture. I was deeply offended by their complete incomprehension of certain classes and how difficult life can be to experience life like that. Their naivety and my experience of the real world really clashed that night" (Lesley; YMS)*

In line with this, *Wendy (M-LS)* described the look of perplexity on the faces of other students and academic staff when she talked with them at first. Her local accent and use of Scots slang (of which she had not, until that point, been aware herself) seemed incomprehensible to them. (I am reminded of Reay's (1998) description of her identity as a working class woman coming under assault.)

However, in direct contrast to the YMS and M-LS participants, one L-LS participant expressed sheer shock that the mainstreamed students even apologised when they swore. She thought this may be because of her obvious seniority suggesting the respect offered to Late-life students seemed to be different from the other two groups (although it could be that this was just a very polite student.)

## **10.6 Daily Challenges for Mature Students**

Referring once again back to Chapter 7:

*“What do the Mature students identify as the greatest challenges to their experience being successful either in the university or home environment, and how could service provision be altered to ease them?”*

The flexibility of an adaptive home, part-time work and study environments was seen as essential. However the lack of boundaries carried with it the possibility of endless burdens of responsibility. The multiplicity of settings can provide an unstable working environment at home and some reported this leading to a loss of connection with the host institution and feelings of isolation. This supports findings within the employment setting (Cairns and Beech, 1999b), indicating some advantages in the security of one stable base.

The data from the journals consistently repeated stories of “juggling” competing responsibilities:

*“I have to take my elder son to Scouts, then it's back to the house, make the meal for the younger one, feed him, cram in an hour's study, then back out to Scouts for pickup...” (Linda, M-LS)*

*“Sometimes I feel inadequate for not being able to cope and keep all the balls in the air at once.” (Nigel; M-LS)*

The main challenges can be placed broadly into three categories; daily life (including part time work and finances), residential (housing), and health concerns.

#### 10.6.1 Daily Life

For the commuting Mature students, the sphere of action frequently alternated. Although Support Services were accessible for all students, Mature students maintained that their own support systems lay in their external families, even if, in actuality, this support was regularly not forthcoming. On the contrary, it seemed as if, in all three age categories, the students had to be the ones giving support to their families as they engaged in study. Four participants commented that, although appreciating that they would have to fit study time in at home, they had underestimated how much they would have to factor in continuing, and sometimes, increasing attention to family.

Once again, with one or two exceptions blurred on the boundaries, the three age classification identified a specific role for the family. With the YMS participants, there was still an emphasis on approval. The families who had no tradition of HE missed a shared understanding of realities which the participants were experiencing daily; immovable aspects of student life such as attendance requirements or submission deadlines. However in one case, this lack of familiarity took on an alluring air:

*My Mum told me I wouldn't stick the course when I came up with the idea in the first place. But now she teases me about becoming an “Academic Boffin” and she's clearly really proud” (Eddie; YMS)*

Within this YMS category Sarah was an exception, sharing, instead, the common family theme of the M-LS participants; that of guilt. As the carer for two

chronically ill parents and a younger sister, undertaken at long distance, she described:

*While still standing by my decision to come, I feel I've abandoned them and I know that their care needs will only increase. When I do return home, the clash of responsibilities heightens and I feel torn with guilt. I constantly feel I should be doing more. My way of dealing with this is to reiterate to myself that I am doing this for a justifiable purpose; "the end justifies the means". Once qualified, I will be able to move closer to home and be responsible for their care then." (Sarah)*

One M-LS participant (*Linda*) became pregnant in the middle of the study and had to adjust her self-definition carrying another alien identity as a mother into the study environment. The tension of trying to blend the essentially clashing role boundaries was acute and the physical exhaustion of answering competing demands compounded the situation. The conflict between the two, apparently opposing, modes of operation is indicative of the tensions explored by Huxham and Beech (2003) and she described a form of reflective practice on the experience regularly. Alongside the conflict and the reflection, came, once again, the guilt.

The shared experience of guilt recurred throughout others' narratives, as one who is choosing to place study above immediate obligation to loved ones. Six of the participants in the M-LS category had dependent children, three of them pre-school age. Complexities of daily prioritising childcare, school social and activity diaries and combining them with study and, often work also, saw identity and role alteration of "mind-spinning" proportions on occasion. When two roles clashed and a direct choice had to be made, two participants noted the guilt they felt at substituting themselves, for example, by having their children picked up by other parents or by having other members of the family attend on their behalf at special school concerts etc. (*Linda* and *Julia*; both M-LS). Given the rural setting of the University, many Mature students had childcare and transport difficulties:

*“My days run from 8.20am (to make it for 11 am lectures) returning home at 8.40pm at night, 4 days per week. My 14 year old daughter is able to look after herself a lot of the time although friends help transport her to after-school clubs. My family life is minimal, but I try to grab quality time.....” (Julia, M-LS)*

The academics were sympathetic when a situation was fully explained, but *Julia* had formed the impression that the institution encouraged young students and made no allowances for someone commuting or with family responsibilities, an impression shared with others.

The emerging strain in couple relationships was commented upon by six of the eight participants who, across all three age groups, were in long-term, committed relationships.

*“We always spend plenty of time with the kids in the evenings and at the weekends but it is our time that has really suffered.....It’s hard and the only solution sometimes is to take a night off, concentrate on each other, and fall behind in the work. But it’s worth it.” (Grant; YMS)*

The particular problems of L-LS participants thinking of coming to university has been highlighted in Chapter 9. These continued as the study years progressed:

*“....as time passed, and [my husband] retired himself, he found it difficult to understand why I am still going at it. He says “I’m retired now. I don’t know why you bother now”.(Margaret; L-LS)*

*“.....always being told by wife I am lazy because I sit at my computer. Keep getting told I’m wasting my time and I’m trying to be someone I’m not”. (Alex; L-LS)*

The first quote would seem to show an interpretation by Margaret’s husband that the purpose of university is for employment preparation, while this last statement may indicate that Alex’s wife is recognising the risk to his identity change. Alex thought it was rooted in jealousy for she had not had educational opportunities.

Alongside the investment in time, the strains on the family were reported to be aggravated by the financial hardship often incurred with participants committing

significantly large sums of money. However six participants, considered their entry to HE as a sound financial investment based on the expectation that a higher financial salary would be gained on graduation. Few seemed to have thought through the blind faith that they expressed in believing that lucrative employment was not dependent on a vocational course. *Sarah*, undertaking a vocational course, was an exception:

*“It’s so expensive [to rent a flat]. I can only afford to [borrow money] because I know if I just get the job out of this degree I’ll be able to pay it back. I have a friend who’s my age and who is doing Art History. I don’t know how she sleeps at night worrying about how she’s going to pay it all back!” (Sarah, YMS)*

Others based their assumption on past and current evidence of those in society in the most powerful positions, earning higher salaries, and who, in general, had attended university. It would appear to be that there is a 20 year time-lag in the actuality of this is being experienced.

To complicate the risk further, they found that after they were “in the system”, they changed subjects according to enjoyment of the course material or because they had identified that they were particularly talented at a subject, irrespective of its employability and/or likeliness of financial return. I read this to be an adoption of the “*academic mentality*”, an internal value recognising knowledge for knowledge’ sake, a belief they began to share within the academic staff increasing over time and distancing the connection with the initial motivation to join. A prime example of this would be the graduate, *Harry*, described in the introduction to this thesis.

The juggling of lifestyles, the prioritising of two sets of seemingly urgent commitments, and carrying responsibilities for others, further complicated the establishment of a residential base.

#### 10.6.2 Residential Concerns

The geographical location was a clear structural restraint, limiting agency in terms of timetabling clashes with transport restrictions or exclusion from residentially

based socialising. However, although the University did not advertise itself as specifically a residential one, 93% did live away from home. Commuting students all reported struggling with the exhaustion from time to time:

*“I am beginning to get tired - it is 2 buses in and 2 buses out and I’m really feeling isolated and don’t think I’ll be able to go on until 2009. It is so far away”.*  
(Margaret, L-LS)

Finding social integration critical to success, the YMS participants expected that university residences would be the arena within which this would be facilitated. However their problems when trying to integrate socially reported earlier were particularly acute in halls. Of the six YMS participants in my study, two left university accommodation and moved back home and two moved in with older students (bringing some lack of congruence of academic maturity):

*“I feel very lost in X Hall, I have nothing to talk about with other students. Old banana sandwiches in the corridors, sticky fridge and giggling partying people during the night don’t make things any better.”* (Katerina)

*“I didn’t really settle in. Although initially I went to a hall of residence, I found that the student life wasn’t for me. I felt uncomfortable with young people that, although not much younger than me, just seemed to be starting out on life and I’d done it all. So I started commuting and then I wasn’t trying to pretend I was like them.”* (Eddie; YMS)

The other two asked repeatedly to transfer. For one, the discord continued throughout her four years at the university. Her plea, as a policy recommendation:

*“University - Please let Mature students live with people of a similar age!! Be it postgrads or young staff....”* (Katerina; YMS)

Occasional overnight accommodation was suggested by three commuters who thought it an opportunity to mix in the evenings and identify a peer group:

*“This is a rural university. Local Mature students will be travelling distances along icy rural roads. We have no chance of attending evening events or departmental late talks unless we have somewhere to stay. The university really needs some overnight accommodation for us to stay occasionally” (Nigel; M-LS)*

Once again, it is interesting to note that this quote comes from a Mid-Life student who refers to the integration in academic terms, rather than social. However, this usefully brings us back to the thorny debate on the extent of university remit. It is to be remembered that the Students’ Association has some responsibility of provision of services for their members also and the participants in my study thought that there was a role for that organisation in enabling commuter students to join in mainstreamed student activities. Commuting students described coping strategies:

*“Falling asleep at the wheel has often been a concern, hence my regular snoozes in a lay-by on the dual carriageway.” (Nigel, M-LS)*

*“it is tough standing around in the cold with public transport in the winter.....but I can work on the bus which is lucky so that helps with the studying”. (Margaret, L-LS)*

*“I get travel sick, but I can study while I wait in bus stations” (Julia, M-LS)*

Female students commented on feeling vulnerable:

*“I am travelling sometimes through snow in rural, isolated areas, and I worry about the journey or the car breaking down – especially at night” (Linda, M-LS)*

Reliance on the family car led to commuting problems if there was a clash with another member of the family for its use (*Alex, L-LS*) or if it needed to be fixed in a garage. University trust funds, established with private donations of alumni, were available for application by the students in these types of situations. Nevertheless, with focus on the social life centred on the residential estate, the tendency was for the commuting to confirm the positioning of being outside the core arena, even if, as was the case for *Pauline (M-LS)* they lived relatively locally:

*“I somehow feel I have no right to be here. Even now, I don’t see myself as a student. I have stayed feeling like a townspeople who is just popping into the university now and again.”*

The University systems, policies and procedures may not have helped, but rather than being deliberately positioned by others, the participants perceived that the mainstreamed students were essentially ignorant of the complications of their study experience; they did not seem to understand the transport difficulties commuters faced and, subsequently, made no allowances:

*“Turned up for [tutor’s] class only to find it was cancelled 1 hour before it was due to start. That was on [Monday] and the next session was to be held on Tuesday, when I was not due to come in” (Margaret, L-LS)*

*“It’s like we’re meant to be a captive audience, just ready and waiting for study. Once, when I had inches of snow at home, I phoned the tutor 25 miles away to say I couldn’t get to a tutorial, and he doubted me! He just couldn’t think outside of the university and there wasn’t any snow there. It rankled with me that he had been so caught up in his little world.....he hadn’t realised that, in the world outside, some people are overcoming grand obstacles to get there just in order to study”. (Julia; M-LS)*

It is worth noting that my interviews with the academic staff presented a picture that suggests *Julia* was unlucky:

*“.....with attendance, it is a better experience for the whole tutorial group if everyone turns up, but sometimes it is necessary to ignore that a Mature student is absent since they have the intellect and organisational skills to go away and learn around the material.” (Academic B)*

Data from all three groups acknowledged the transport difficulties for commuters. While taking this as another policy suggestion for the institution, it could be extended to encourage publicising the “residential norm” as a transparency to inform applicants’ decisions. However it has to be recognised that, competing in a single market, repercussions of lower applications and a narrower range of students may prove dissuasive to managers, especially in the face of Government funding conditions.

### 10.6.3 Health Issues

The data revealed Health as the third broad issue of concern to Mature students; it was critical that systems in the institution could accommodate ill-health allowances. Examples in each group would include:

*“At the point of doing my A levels I fell ill and missed them. It took me a long time to recover.” (Sarah, YMS)*

*Have found out I am pregnant which I am thoroughly happy about. Wonder how this will affect attitudes etc. at university? Main concern that I have is.....how will I fit into the chair desk contraption as I get bigger?” (Linda, M-LS)*

*I thought I might have cancer last year and had to have a major operation in hospital. However luckily this happened around holidays and I only ended up missing one tutorial. (Margaret, L-LS)*

Eight participants stated that they had continued studies through their ill-health; their burden of responsibilities, time organisation and self-commitment compelling them to carry on, reluctant to ask for allowances. In contrast to *Julia* quoted above, these participants reported that, if forced to ask for help, they found staff understanding:

*“It’s as if they know that we wouldn’t make this up so they always automatically believe us and are eager to help right from the start. I think sometimes they suspect that the younger students are just trying it on”. (Wendy; M-LS)*

In fact, this interpretation was supported by some of the academics interviewed who put forward that they trusted Mature students not to lie. This could link an assumption of the term “maturity” with “integrity”. Alternatively, it could indicate that academics feel less able to challenge someone of their own, or older, age.

The data revealed other interpretations of the word “Mature” which the students thought staff made. “Organised” and “Able to manage stress” were two of the suggestions put forward. I linked the latter with Robertson (2000) who described the additional suffering of students who would not admit to stress for fear of appearing weak to fellow students and, as we have seen, the data from the student

participants suggested that they did not like to ask for help or admit to needing special allowances. In one respect, it is claimed that mainstreamed students and international students suffer particular high levels of stress in the first few weeks' transition into university, attributed to the loss of the immediate support of their family and friends (Hudd *et al*, 2000; Baglin, 2003) and therefore one suggestion would be that Mature students actually experience less stress at this time because they retain their home base. The scope of this study disallows from examining this objectively, but the student participants would be unlikely to agree with that supposition.

## **10.7 The Interface with Academic Systems**

Drawing out the key themes in Chapter 7, the interaction between the participants and institutional systems threw up issues summarised as follows:

*“Given the personal responsibilities and distracting commitments, is the academic experience uniformly accessed by Mature students?”*

### **10.7.1 Academic Subcultures**

The data suggest that integration within the university is influenced by the subcultures of the subjects studied, each department and school having its own norms, beliefs and rituals. Morgan's (1997) model of an organic organisation described a fluid, changing structure which was compiled of very different parts. The following recognition of the subcultures supported this:

*“I had different styles of teaching, different expectations, different ways of behaving. Psychology was more formal, Art History, much more relaxed. I was really surprised. It's not as if it feels like the same institution.” (Linda; M-LS)*

A major source of tension involved a clash of expectations at the academic advising stage, all students without exception being dismissive of the “advising” procedure as a “bureaucratic tick”:

*“I think the guidance for module choice is very poor. Each module is described only in a few lines in a book. You don’t get at all a sense of a topic.” (Pauline; ML-S)*

Student participants expected “advice” to be given, with relevance to the participants’ own life circumstances. Our “Pork-Pie Picker” commented:

*“I expected to open career doors and so this was important. However it has never been mentioned to me by staff and no guidance has been offered”. (Eddie, YMS)*

The staff and students clearly did not share the understanding that it was legitimate to compromise on course module choices in order to engage in a vocational pathway or to accommodate personal responsibilities, e.g. childcare:

*“It would have been helpful if I had had positive advising on what a course offered, and what the consequences would be for me, given my personal circumstances.” (Nigel; M-LS)*

*“I feel strongly that students are entering universities in their droves with no idea what they want to do at the end of their time there. They are vaguely good at something and so they think they’ll do that. But it doesn’t occur to them that it’s expensive and they’re going to end up with debt and unemployment at the end”. (Sarah; YMS)*

*“I would have liked advice on what the implications of the academic choices are. What do certain courses lead to? What will particular combinations of choices do for you?” (Anna; YMS)*

The data also revealed informal learning opportunities for mainstreamed students centring on social groups in Halls of Residence from which commuting Mature students felt excluded. This triggers memories of studies in the literature which identified the greater difficulties for commuting students who faced structural barriers to accessing the full range of social and cultural opportunities attached to an institution (Christie *et al*, 2004). The study groups in the evenings were inconvenient in terms of personal responsibilities, transport, finance, and in lack of peer groups within academic subjects. These groups assisted with academic support at times of the year (e.g. examinations), forming an academic subculture

system, and feeling barred from it therefore minimised the academic experience for Mature students.

#### 10.7.2 Interaction with Teaching Staff

The relative age congruence between Mature students and staff was read to be both a positive and a negative. On a positive basis, a level of understanding between the two was interpreted by the mainstreamed students to be a sign of hierarchical superiority; they expected the Mature students to engage with the tutor and take the leadership role in classes, and especially in group teaching situations. The participants and many tutors identified the common link of a closer age relationship easing the dialogue with shared discourses and understandings. Contrasting this, however, (and especially where the age discrepancy was small between YMS participants and young tutors):

*“It can be difficult for a Mature student to ask or take junior staff member’s wisdom” (Academic B)*

...and journal entries supported this from the receiver end:

*“This particular tutor is about 5 minutes older than me, which I don’t think she likes very much.” Lesley (YMS)*

*“My confidence is lacking with some staff, but especially those that are younger than me” (Pauline, M-LS)*

One L-LS remembered his astonishment that a suggestion was rejected for poor sourcing:

*“We were citing examples of refugees in Geography and I talked about the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the refugees from the Tristan Da Cunha volcanic eruption of 1961. The lecturer challenged me by asking how I knew these things had happened, and I defended it by saying “I know because I was there! Would you believe it - he wouldn’t accept that?” (Alex; L-LS)*

The lecturer's motive was unclear, whether s/he was intending to provide a helpful critique teaching academic sourcing techniques or retaliating to a personal challenge from perhaps a greater claim to authority. However *Alex* took away from this that the university experience had changed his self-perception and he now had incorporated a definition of himself as a walking historical account of a slice of social history.

When participants were positioned in a subordinate role by others, lacking respect for age or life experience (such as the above quote might be given to illustrate) this was, unsurprisingly, resented. 10 participants recounted incidents of being, in their view, treated like a child, in what they termed, a "patronising" fashion but, interestingly, only by administrative and not academic staff:

*"During our welcome there was a session during which the law was laid down in accordance with university rules. It was done in a very authoritarian manner which I found mildly offensive. I don't mind sticking to the rules but I like to be asked nicely."* (Grant; YMS)

*"They [staff at Orientation] make statements like "all you youngsters straight from home". Even though there's six mature students sitting in the corner."* (Janice, M-LS)

*"Stupid rules "no carrots AND salad, even when taking no dessert""* (Katerina; YMS)

The accused lack of respect could, of course, relate to mainstreamed students also. However, I would suggest the difference lies in the frequency of the expressed view and the participants' perception that there is a distinctive emphasis on age in this environment where the authoritarian manner is more reminiscent of a school. Once again, however, it is important to restrict this criticism to administrative staff only, confirming the Academic staff recounting of pleasure at having Mature students in their class and underlining the relationship as one of sharing critical thoughts rather than one trying to "organise" the other.

### 10.7.3 The Teaching Format

Small group teaching has been credited in the literature as useful to develop a sense of belonging for non-traditional students (Kember *et al*, 2001; Greenan *et al*, 1997). However in my study, the experience of small group teaching engendered divided opinion. Some participants found it a useful tool for academic integration with some of the mainstreamed students in the class. However, some found the disorganisation of mainstreamed students disrupting to their study, leaving the Mature student to adopt the leadership role, or take a back seat and potentially lose marks:

*“It’s the first time, this semester, when all my modules are being done in small teams. At the beginning it drove me mad... the younger ones don’t turn up at the meeting or are very late. They do not seem to understand that they abuse the time of others. I am so annoyed” (Pauline; M-LS)*

Frustration was voiced of having the wisdom that can come with maturity and which others noticeably lacked:

*“Find that sometimes there is a lack of common basis with younger students. They say things and it’s tempting to think “Just you wait until you grow up and it won’t be like that”. Tempting to sit them down and tell them what it will really be like. But avoid doing that and just nod quietly” (Nigel, M-LS)*

The mainstreamed students, however, told the participants that they found it advantageous having a Mature student in their group:

*“The staff and students seem to like having a mature student in their class because that person will speak up on behalf of the other students if the younger ones are keeping quiet.” (Margaret; L-LS)*

Reports of not enjoying the group teaching because of disrespect and lack of organisation skills, combined with the pressure to be the leader, came from the Mid-life and Late-life participants. However, supporting the literature’s group teaching recommendation, the YMS participants did seem to find the academic experiential setting helpful in facilitating the integration which they sought.

## 10.8 Key Findings

To draw the threads of the findings in this chapter together, areas of focus include identity, integration, fit, discourses, challenges and system interfaces:

### 10.8.1 Identity

#### 10.8.1.1 The “Mature” label was viewed as non-essentialist

Having been drawn into the essentialist/non-essentialist debate when examining the definition of the complex term, “Mature”, plus the three sub-categories (based on motivational forces), leads me to the conclusion that it cannot be essentialist or fixed. Sub-categories could be found in terms of multiple categorisations; everything from musical tastes, commuter *versus* residential, faculty studies etc. And yet the actual definition is, on the face of it, quantitatively fixed by government policy. The YMS participants give a stark reminder that the term can leave some in an ambiguous state of “*no man’s land*”.

#### 10.8.1.2 Student participants were slow to exercise agency in removing structural barriers

When examining the remit of the university, and of the Students’ Association, consideration has to be given to the role of the students themselves and their agency to change their own experience. Student governance now offers this possibility more than at any time previously and yet, in my study, I did not come across an enthusiasm for changing the system. The participants were more prepared to accept structural barriers and were reluctant to challenge them, suggesting an acceptance of the validity of their being positioned as “*outsiders*”.

#### 10.8.1.3 It is difficult to encourage M-LS males to enter university

The M-LS participants had a heavy gender imbalance of women. It is conjecture to consider if HE has a difficulty of attracting male breadwinners. If so, it may be that this is particularly the case in an Ancient with little emphasis on vocational courses. This has implications for the public financing of courses, but is also about the psychological effect of being no longer in control and leading the family.

## 10.8.2 Integration

### 10.8.2.1 The amended Havigurst classification is still appropriate in terms of integration

Critically in terms of integration, my study has shown distinct categorisation in line with the three student participants' groups, extending the motivational categorisation in the previous chapter. Echoing Duquette's (2000) study of disabled students, the M-LSs offered another diverse group who had little interest in integrating socially with mainstreamed students, limiting their interest to academic integration. In direct contrast, the YMS participants craved being accepted as part of the mainstreamed students' "In-Group". These two groups therefore support Cooke *et al's* (2004) finding by either not managing to, or not wanting to, socialise at university.

### 10.8.2.2 L-LS participants integrated well with mainstreamed students

In contrast, the L-LS participants did not expect to be accepted, but found, much to their surprise, that they integrated well with the mainstreamed students on the basis that there were no expectations of either party. Participants under 50 were unimpressed by the lack of respect shown by mainstreamed students to staff and each other. It would not have been surprising if an older generation had condemned the manners of a younger one. However, again based on lack of pre-judgment, the L-LS participants were surprisingly unaware of this problem. The L-LSs were acutely aware that they expected to be in the "Out-Group", respecting the university as the rightful territory of the mainstreamed. They expected no favours.

### 10.8.2.3 The practical problems hindering integration are compounded at a rural, residential university

Practical barriers for Mature students to socialise with mainstreamed students are well documented within the retention literature (Bamber & Tett, 2001; Read *et al*, 2003), but specific to my study was the examination within a rural context which included the lack of a local base, difficulty in transport and family responsibilities with long travel times between bases.

### 10.8.3 Fit – Identifying Peers

#### 10.8.3.1 YMSs, with the smallest age gap, experience the poorest fit with mainstreamed students.

“*Feeling an oddity*”, was more of an issue for those closest in age, *i.e.* the YMSs. This was a surprising finding to me, but, in retrospect, perhaps it should have been obvious that, if the expectation is that there will be no gap, any gap then feels like a gulf. Linking with Social Categorization Theory (Turner *et al*, 1994), and “In Group/Out Group” theory (Allport, 1954), the expectation by the YMSs that, categorising group membership on the basis of student status, they would share the same beliefs as the mainstreamed students, were surprised that these were not realised as they found themselves in the “Out-Group” based on a categorisation of age, residential status and/or life experience.

#### 10.8.3.2 Junior members of academic staff were considered peers by M-LSs

In line with the Fit Studies (Chatman, 1989) student participants felt commitment and satisfaction if they identified people with like-characteristics. However, in my study the M-LS category identified these peers amongst junior members of staff, judging them in terms of life experience and shared beliefs. The “Fit” measurement thus depends on the characteristics chosen. The fit characteristic of difference may not only be in terms of age; nationality and other factors have to be considered.

### 10.8.4 Discourses

#### 10.8.4.1 Discourse clashes were alternated, complicating adjustment.

The student identity had to be recast as the student alternated between home and university environments. The discourses facilitating integration in one setting can prove a hindrance in the other and the commuter participants in my study had to be particularly nimble at alternating between the two. The student participants emphasised the importance of acquiring academic discourses (supporting Lawrence, 2001) but my study explored how it felt to the participants to adopt this, describing it sometimes in terms of betrayal of their home setting. My study has also emphasised the factor of frequency of recasting the roles as a complication for

integration of commuters. It further recognises that the age influence on discourse was compounded by socio-economic discourses and geographical influences.

#### 10.8.4.2 Families could benefit from direct communication

A policy suggestion was for families to be included in the information at the recruitment and orientation stage to aid with the understanding of what the other world was like in at least one of the settings and bring them into the study experience, minimising alienation.

#### 10.8.5 Challenges

##### 10.8.5.1 Guilt for those with dependent families

The M-LS participants found guilt a predominant emotion as they limited their family role and could not fulfil domestic expectations (including “breadwinning”) of their families on a daily basis.

##### 10.8.5.2 Ill-health; but student participants were reluctant to ask for help

In terms of identity definition, “Age” carries with it unfortunate consequences, including health and disability concerns. Health was a major concern of the student participants and suggests a more concentrated focus in policy terms to adapt and provide appropriate systems to address these needs. Previous findings in the literature which stressed the reluctance of Mature students to ask for help, in fear of appearing weak to other students and staff (Robertson, 2000) were supported and recognised by staff who described seldom being asked for special allowances by Mature students even when requests would carry obvious validity.

#### 10.8.6 Interface with Systems.

##### 10.8.6.1 Joined-up systems, preparing for Mature students, are still not in place in some institutions

The data suggests that, despite being called for by Fulton (1989), the joined-up, prepared approach, anticipating the needs of non-traditional students is still some way off some 20 years later.

#### 10.8.6.2 Clarification is required as to where the responsibility for entry guidance lies

The participants sought academic guidance (not special allowances) at the early stages offering advice on personal targets and combining family commitments, transport issues and timetable clashes with external responsibilities. This would not necessarily be anticipated by the Academic staff who expected them to work these things out themselves prior to arrival and yet there was little information available for the students to do this.

The findings have explored the queries which I raised in Chapter 1 in the “Bonding” category. Chapter 11 will now go on with a predominantly retrospective focus to explore how the participants in my study reflected on the experience of HE, up to the point they are now at, particularly measuring its contribution to the student participants’ lives in terms of loss or gain.

## Chapter 11

### Reflections – The Value of the Experience

#### *Reflections on the Interaction*

##### **11.1 Introduction**

The participants made significant sacrifices in order to engage with a university education, consequentially being pressured to succeed. In assessing personal loss or gain there has to be a target and a measured outcome. Nevertheless the process of study, rather than the outcome of a degree, offers opportunities for intrinsic measures of success, even if the full course is not completed (Quinn *et al*, 2005). This study offered the opportunity for measured perceptions of a more subtle loss or gain quality, experienced in a real-time setting.

This chapter begins by examining the influences behind the most obvious measurement of success or failure in quantitative research terms; retention to graduation. Taken from the perspective of those who have been retained, despite considering withdrawal on occasion, this study's emphasis is on the influencing factors that led to the final decision to stay, thereby focusing on the quality of the experience rather than the "blunt" instrument of retention. For my participants, questions around retention of their registration were happening now, on an ongoing basis, and their reasons for staying, evaluating their current lives, were very real.

Is it essential for the participants to complete the degree programme for them to identify themselves as successful or are there other gains made along the way? Can these gains become more important than the actual degree? This would seem to go to the heart of the key research question. A major point of learning theoretical and policy lessons from Mature students is that we need to know whether, given the student ambitions and expectations, recognising the tensions of HE and the daily pressures, is it really worth it, overall, to Mature students to study at an ancient university?

Finally the chapter examines how the concept of “self” develops throughout the study experience and takes a focus on some particular aspects of identity and the value they offer to the Mature students.

## **11.2 Retention / Attrition threats**

Once again, returning to the literature, Chapter 7 brought the key themes together in the following question:

*“What helps Mature students to identify and overcome barriers and do staff realise ways in which they can assist in this?”*

In this section I take a different approach by focusing first on the literature, Armstrong (1996) and Waters and Gibson (2001), both produced structures to explain student attrition, outlining three areas influencing attrition and three for retention. It may be helpful, as a backdrop to remind ourselves of these as:

### Attrition:

- lack of commitment to the course (psycho-social),
- higher work load than expected and wrong choice of course (interactionist)
- financial problems, family concerns, poor or non-existent support (external constraints)

### Retention:

- personal motivation, sense of self-esteem and a sense of achievement and purpose (psycho-social)
- positive working atmosphere (interactionist)
- good supporting networks (lack of external constraints)

The selected ex-students who had already withdrawn from the university at the start of my study declined to formally respond to repeated invitations to take part. The

literature suggests that reasons for attrition are multi-faceted; no one reason will be influential enough to force withdrawal on its own. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that there will be a number of stages prior to actually leaving when a student considers this as an option but the influences to stay were more powerful. It is this process that has a place within this study.

At interview, the student participants were asked directly whether they had considered withdrawing at any stage. Adopting a quantitative stance, it is interesting as a backdrop to note that eight out of the 16 said they had considered it. This is not an age-specific finding, since a straw poll carried out during the investigation asked 50 mainstreamed students if they had considered leaving and found 24 of them had. This tells us little for we would have to know if Mature students consider leaving *more frequently* or *actually did leave* more than the mainstreamed population. Unfortunately a conclusive response to that query has to be for another study, a complex area since the frequency of temporary intent will be difficult to assess. However, in a statistical benchmark noted within a general context in 2004/5, 7.2% of mainstreamed students actually withdrew after their first year in study while that figure for Mature students was exactly double at 14.4%. (HESA, 2006)

In terms of timing, the widespread finding in both English and Scottish literature is that 2/3 of students who withdraw from HE, do so in the first year, (Christie *et al*, 2001; Christie *et al*, 2002; Yorke, 1998) and, in Scotland, almost certainly by the end of their second year. This was further supported by the student data in my study since, of those who had considered attrition; the thought had been most prevalent within that timeframe. Returning to qualitative evidence and asking “*why did you not act on that thought?*” practical changes, such as alternative university accommodation (*Katerina, Sarah; YMS*), made life easier. Three participants, (*Eddie; YMS, Anna; YMS and Nigel; ML-S*), mentioned making friends as being the turning point for them (good internal supports). For most, the stress they had been experiencing was to do with the combination of external pressures

and internal exam deadlines, questioning if they had the academic strength to compete. Their decision to continue with their studies, they said, had come when one or other of the pressures were relieved: for example, support came in the form of financial hardship grants helping to pay a bill, an academic tutor agreeing to move a deadline, or a bout of ill health being treated by doctors successfully.

The consistent data finding was that hurdles were short-term and surmountable; it took relatively little to ease the pressure and encourage reconnection with the study course. There was no sense of drama; these people were skilled in dealing pragmatically with issues and maintaining their forward momentum. Some adhered to the philosophy of:

*“live each day at a time and challenge each problem when faced and you’ll usually win through”. (Wendy, M-LS)*

Some reported compromise and self-sacrifice as fundamental requirements if the decision to be taken was a major one. Interestingly, this approach is in contrast with that adopted when faced with minor problems for, as was described in section 10.2, the students would assume it was their fault and withdraw from the situation. So the justifications for staying had to be stronger, and reasoned in a measured way, competing with the everyday, natural instinct to turn away.

Asked to highlight how they reasoned the decision to stay, six participants described the main one as preventing loss of face in front of others; academics, family, mentors. Their determination to prove those with low opinions of them wrong supported Waters and Gibson’s psychosocial influences argument (2001) and demonstrated a sociological determination to recast themselves as different people, in accordance with a vision that the Mature students had created. When *Pauline* felt external burdens were overwhelming, she remembered the opinion of her mother and ex-boyfriend and determined to reinvent herself, proved them wrong:

*“I had a boyfriend that told me that I couldn’t do it. I determined not to go home but to do this degree to “show” my mum and my boyfriend.” (Pauline, M-LS)*

In all she estimated she had had 35 jobs while completing her four-year course but maintained her determination to realise her degree target.

*“...if something had to go, it was something other than the study”.*

The need to prove herself to others was inextricably linked with that of proving to herself that she had value.

Participants in the YMS category (referred to, experimentally, in Chapter 9 as “Drifters”) were the ones who described withdrawing as not being a valid option.

The level of commitment and sacrifice needed to undertake one of these courses at a later age led some to fundamentally reject any suggestion that failure was an option:

*“I feel I have had lots of failures in my life and have walked away from things. I am determined that this will not be an option this time.” (Grant, YMS)*

The Mid-Life participants acknowledged the significance that other family members took on when, as an active actor in a joint family decision to study, they, too, had to make sacrifices. As such, there was an obligation felt to these members which resulted in the participants overcoming difficulties and staying the course with a strengthened commitment. However it would be reasonable to consider this as not necessarily exclusive to Mature students. Mainstreamed students may have these senses of obligation to parents who are funding their studies and consideration of who has the greater sense of obligation lies in a future, comparative, study.

The influence of the academic work on retention or attrition was difficult to identify in the discussions. Asked directly in the interviews, the participants could neither observe themselves nor provide any practical evidence that a consideration of withdrawal had been linked with a particular academic challenge. This would support the finding of Christie *et al* (2004) that leaving university could not be

conveniently excused as a direct result of academic weakness. What was interesting was the lack of focus on academic inability as a primary motive for attrition; rather than the actual mark, it was the significance placed on that mark under their interpretation and this had a lot to do with the competing pressures in their lives which gave the academic mark a sense of perspective:

*“I thought I wouldn’t really be happy with less than a 14. Had a 17 and a 13 in my first subjects and was unhappy with the 13 - although I had only been aiming for a 5 by that time I was so tired.” (Linda, M-LS)*

Some participants suggested that their expectation of academic achievement was lower than mainstreamed students, but this was not supported by the other participants. There was some acknowledgement in the data of “learner shock” (Griffiths *et al*, 2005) of Mature students (particularly M-LSs) returning to formal education and contradictory discoveries for some in Late-life:

*“As a child I was told that Edinburgh was built on 7 volcanoes, although now we accept that it is actually only 1 volcano with 6 smaller feeders. In my day there was no such thing as continental drift – this having been discovered in the 60s”. (Alex, L-LS)*

However, as their successful completion of academic assignments increased in both number and quality of results through each semester, each mark reinforced an external validation of academic ability; the participants grew in academic confidence:

*“I like the fact that you get a mark after each module as it motivates me for the next modules. I think it is like a reward or tokens.” (Pauline, M-LS)*

*“I didn’t think I’d be able to do half the things I’ve ended up doing. I know that I have a brain now. If I just have the time to concentrate, I think I can master anything. It’s getting the time that’s difficult” (Wendy; M-LS).*

It may be that those with academic weakness leave early on in the first year, prior to having their ability substantially tested in January of the first year. It could also be that some failed in the first January sitting. However, careful consideration would

have to be given in another study to separation of attrition reasons of “learner shock” or from practical burdens which could not be accommodated.

### **11.3 Academic Achievements**

Focus on the indication of success deviated from quantitative retention to include self-assessment of gains in many other areas of their lives (see 11.4). The progress of the journey presents challenges of academic compatibility, the speed and effort exerted during the process, coping with external and internal burdens, and the quality level of result targeted. The question identified which leads us into exploring this area was:

*“Do Mature students sense that they aim higher academically than their mainstreamed peers and, if this is so, how do they account for it?”*

A high academic aim is an uncertain target; the desire to achieve and even the volume of work input to realise this, need not result in a high grade for, as Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) point out, the external burdens can negatively affect the process, no matter how focused the student is. In the YMS and M-LS categories, further employability complications focused the degree in terms of subject choices. Nevertheless, Linda’s story (above) was typical of participants in all groups as they (with three exceptions) described the average mark as not good enough for them.

*“I made a decision half way through first semester that I wanted to have a first class degree.....” (Anna, YMS)*

In the YMS group, in particular, two-thirds of the participants had even changed their original focus after graduation to aim for Postgraduate study. One can speculate as to the reasons behind the overall high academic aim. In the last chapter I discussed the change in identity of Mature students arriving at the door of an Ancient; their special identity recast as a new, “Out-Group”, member, lacking confidence. From having a self-image of being special to have been selected, they saw themselves as old and slow in gaining this achievement compared to the mainstreamed students. I would suggest that perhaps in order to regain a more

secure or positive identity, the participants adopted the rules for criteria of respect and acknowledgement by their mainstreamed colleagues and staff within this new setting, that is, by achieving high marks. The acceptance by the academic community and respect in intellectual terms became important, thus placing them in a hierarchical position on an intellectual basis.

Participants reported that, once engaged with the ethos of education, the thirst for learning set in, but that, for many of them, this process had happened prior to arriving at the university. This may be one link with the increased ability to focus recognised in Mature students in comparison with mainstreamed students, reported by the Academic participants and supporting the literature (Yorke, 1998; Lumb and Vail, 2004).

In fear of having their efforts underestimated, or the resultant degree devalued, (having established that this would bear a direct relationship to lowering of their personal identity status), the data highlighted a conflict in that no matter how difficult it made their everyday lives, the Mature students wanted to legitimise the current elitist hierarchy. They wanted to recognise and celebrate that rigidity which, to them, represented intellectual stability and upholding of standards. The “Ancient” label added to the enhanced worth of their degree along with the grandiose architecture and the sense of ritual in traditional ceremonies:

*“Studying in a place with a long history surrounded by the lovely architecture really inspired me and made me feel like I was fortunate to be here.” (Grant: YMS)*

The other side of the Ancient label they preferred was their acceptance of the legitimacy of that institution to design its systems for mainstreamed students. So long as they were able to cope, even though the effort required was greater, they wanted “*no easy ride*”, referring to the focus and stamina of the Mature student identity which extra life experience had given them:

*“I saw the kids coming straight from school with straight A’s and I felt that I had to prove to myself that I could do it as good as them. So I tried really hard right from the start. But as the year went on, they got tired and fed up and slowly they dropped off and I was still going and I realised that I could do it” (Eddie, YMS)*

Nevertheless, although reluctant, external unexpected circumstances occasionally necessitated seeking allowances. I would suggest that in harmonising those two, incongruent positions, university policy makers, if enjoying the publicity of a university “community”, must focus on institutional sensitivity to proactively take account of the Mature student identity within that community. In doing so, by managing expectations and flexibly supporting they may aid not only retention, but the fulfilling of academic potential and a raising of the success of the experience overall; the last being a consideration for future alumni support. A fundamental recommendation from the participants’ data highlights the focusing of targets on facilitating a good experience, rather than limiting ourselves to ticking a quantitative retention box, even if this requires a rethinking of the university mission.

Behind the reluctance of academic changes to deadlines, for, e.g. submission, was the aforementioned belief in maintaining the academic elitism, understood by the student participants as intrinsic to maintaining standards. The student participants asked for minor adjustments only, rejecting suggestions that fundamental changes such as academic calendars (Fallows and Symon, 1999) should be made for the introduction of a diverse student population. They had come to “buy a degree” but with that wanted all the traditional trimmings.

#### **11.4 Loss or Gain?**

In Chapter 7 I asked:

*“In terms of financial profit and loss, how do the Mature students rate their chances of realising a return on their financial investment?”*

Surprisingly in the data there was a broad consensus in the identification of losses and gains.

#### 11.4.1 Loss

Supporting Berman Brown (2006), referred to in Chapter 6, the closeness of relationships (with spouse, partner, children, or wider family) was promptly prioritised as the loss felt most acutely. Some (in particular, L-LSs) talked of changed relationships with partners until both became distant. Others spoke of having to give up precious family time with children. *Linda* told of her small son receiving a medal at school. His grandmother substituted for her to support him in his proud moment as *Linda* attended a vital class. Three participants (*Margaret Pauline and Grant*) offered similar examples of clashes of duty; while the family fun time was happening during Christmas week, they were in another room necessarily revising for exams. *Eddie (YMS)* described the hard work of maintaining long-term friendships based in the home setting at night. Within these changing relationships, the loss of common discourses was identified, and this was in each of the two arenas in which they operated. Losing a common ground of language with friends outside of university sometimes left a feeling of isolation with no one in their “*main life*” able to understand their journey (*Margaret; L-LS*). *Grant (YMS)* gave a poignant summary when, in examining his identity, he felt absent while physically present:

*“I miss my wife a lot...I miss her the most when we’re in the same room at night but I’m working on my computer on the other side of the room.”*

The second most common loss was that of financial security, given the significant financial investment required. A consequential loss of peace of mind; participants lost sleep because of money worries. Financial tightness also led to the loss of the little luxuries of life; going into the wardrobe and finding no decent clothes (*Grant; YMS*), or drinking the cheapest drink at the bar instead of stopping to think of what they actually wanted to drink (*Lesley; YMS*). The lack of choice would particularly

offend when mainstreamed students with less financial restraints are watched at the same bar.

The third sacrifice from the data, raised by one of the YMS category (*Katerina*) but symbolic of the huge choices that have to be made, was defined as the postponing of a family because study commitment had become their life focus. Having just completed her four years, her enquiring mind had been opened and it was no longer an option to close that door. She was now about to start a PhD in another university:

*“I’ve done this for the long term job. And once the study is finished, I’ll have to try to find work. But if I find work, then how long can I leave it till I have children? It’s difficult to see when to fit them in.” (Katerina, YMS)*

This “*biological clock ticking*” was described as a loss of security by a number of the female YMS participants who found themselves having to consider this factor as they approached their late twenties.

Lastly, but certainly not least, although increased confidence in academic ability was seen as a gain, an overall loss of self-esteem based on physical attractiveness, was voiced by many more female applicants(7) than male (1) (although females were represented in a 2:1 ratio in the final participation list). The “*crises in self-confidence*” resulting were emphasised and warrant further examination (Section 11.5.2).

#### 11.4.2 Gains

Once again, consensus reigned; the greatest gain was the development of an ongoing thirst for knowledge. Repeated frequently was:

*“Although coming for a degree, I gained a love of education”.*

For all three groups, if for different reasons, the love of learning only became activated after entry:

*“When I started, I was interested.....but very soon I became fascinated!”*  
(Margaret; L-LS)

Once again, the notion of “success” is shown to be individually distinct for each person, given their personal targets and gains in areas different than acquiring a degree. Four participants adhered strongly to the use of flexible access to university education, not necessarily finishing the degree in one smooth constant flow. If the motivation to enter HE had been to gain new social networks, gain formal accreditation for academic prowess but prioritising the recasting of themselves, then these needs could possibly be met within a semester or two, so no time at university was seen to be wasted.

In contrast, the institutional staff aimed administrative systems at evidencing gained knowledge (passing assessments) to the culmination of degree level, within a clear timeframe, and one equivalent to that of a mainstreamed student. One manager (K) considered it timely for a review of the requirement of academic timeframe for non-traditional students.

The acquisition of academic skills was broken down by student participants into gains including aptitude at essay writing, asking questions, looking for proof and developing a critical mind. Two participants (*Eddie; YMS, Julia; M-LS*), used the phrase that they had “*learned to think*”. One participant (*Nigel; M-LS*), although admitting to having gained some theoretical knowledge, thought the most important skill he had developed was “*the ability to use an alternative viewpoint and to argue cogently*”, and was proud to admit that he could do this even when he did not agree with what he was saying! For those who were hoping to enter the employment market, there was a sense that the academic confidence and articulation skills that they had gained throughout their study would be obvious in an interview and would enhance their employment prospects. Additionally, three participants commented

on the increased development, or at least acute awareness, of organisational skills which were especially necessary for those with extra familial responsibilities. All of these gains contributed to the recasting of the self-image into someone more organised and academically confident.

Although, as we have seen, some participants had experienced suffering within their relationships at home through their participation in HE, this was not the case for everyone. Some had become stronger and had risen to a new level, using education as the common ground; *Julia (M-LS)* with her daughter, *Eddie (YMS)* with his absent father. In some cases the actual act of study and success in gaining qualifications had opened the eyes of family members to the intellectual potential of the student, who had thereby gained new respect from their families (e.g. *Pauline, Linda; both M-LS*). Some Mature students who had moved to the area described their love of the town setting and the opportunity for their families to benefit from growing up in a rural setting:

*“It’s like being on holiday every day being a student in this town!” (Grant; M-LS)*

This participant also highlighted the gain particularly significant to the YMS by stating that he had found a stable foundation on which to base his future.

A critical gain was suggested by the oldest participant as being one of “*Fraternity*” a concept likened others in the literature (“*sense of belonging*” [Kember *et al*, 2001] or “*the need to connect*” [Starke & Warne, 1999]). Having spent the majority of his life in the armed forces, his retirement had unearthed a huge gap in terms of comrades, feeling part of a team. As the only person outside of the YMSs determinedly seeking social integration, *Alex* had come to university searching specifically for it and had, he declared, been successful. Consequentially he also found confidence in social skills, for example, public speaking. These skills, although identified as a gain for many, were also thought of as surprising. They had arrived at the university feeling they were “*worldly-wise*” and able to cope with the social challenges better

than the new mainstreamed students. However, their skills had developed by mixing within the “*great melting pot*” of social classes, ethnic origins and intellects present at university.

Although staff supported the need to maintain the degree as the central target, additional gains were identified by them which they thought Mature students could acquire throughout the study experience:

- For YMS participants, who had had decisions mapped out for them since they were teenagers, university encouraged the development of agency; the chance for these students to take control and pull their lives in a completely different direction. Additionally they were offered the chance to widen their knowledge base and then test themselves.
- M-LSs could acquire academic *skills* rather than simple credits. These would include time management, presentations to groups, public speaking, arguing critically, learning to think, and to question and would be helpful in terms of “employability”. (Of course, would also apply to the YMS).
- L-LS participants would have the offer of “*Adventure*”. Providing an insight to “youth”, it encouraged an interest in life, giving them the chance to widen their horizons.

Critical by its omission was the lack of reference by the staff groups to “direct employment”. However, once again, emphasis has to be placed on the contrast between this and the “employability” highlighted above; the belief being that students who had the drive would be able to take whatever subject they graduate in and transform it into a useful commodity for employers to be attracted to:

*“It is the experience that it takes to get that degree that develops the person and makes that person more employable” (Manager H)*

## 11.5 The Development of “Self”

Referring back to the literature in Chapters 4 and the data from my own study in Chapter 9, we know that students are motivated to come to university seeking psychological gains as a close second to the drive for employability or financial gain. Chapter 7, examining the emerging themes of self-development, asked:

*“In terms of psychological losses and gains, how do Mature students rate these?”*

Once again, allowing the data to contribute to the shape of this thesis, key influences on the sense of self fell into five categories: age awareness, attractiveness, perception of academic ability, self-definition, and conflict between selves.

### 11.5.1 Age Awareness

At the core of a “Mature” student is the definition of the person in terms of age. All participants reported socialising with students of a similar age to themselves, seeking reassurance that their membership in HE was valid, or at least, not invalid because of age.

*“I’ve always felt different to other students. Felt I was always less intelligent than them and I somehow had no right to be there.” (Pauline, M-LS)*

Finding others of a similar age reinforced the collective position on the periphery but labelled a group of them as “outsiders” rather than stigmatising the individual.

*Julia (M-LS)* advocated the provision of transparent university profiles accessible to prospective students. However, Managers pointed out that if the transparency was to be carried out with honesty, the profile of an institution would not necessarily appeal to a wider market, thus defeating attempts to widen access and maintain “fit” processes of like attracting like, as highlighted by Chatman (1989).

A constant source of frustration for the younger-looking ones in the YMS group was the anomaly of feeling considerably emotionally and temperamentally older without these aspects being reflected in their looks:

*“Some people know and some don’t know that I am older. I don’t look older. But that means that everything I say will seem silly” (Pauline, M-LS)*

Some came to the institution expecting that they would be treated differently by staff on the basis of their age, perhaps with more respect. If this expectation was not realised, participants interpreted this as a lack of respect for their life experience:

*“Am not allowed to put up my own curtains (“soft furniture”) very unfriendly with two managers – I am treated like the other 16 year olds! “No other curtains, its as easy as that!”” (Katerina, YMS)*

On several occasions in the interviews a link was made between age and wisdom, the latter encompassing life experience, acumen, insight, shrewdness, and “*nous*”. A number of the participants felt obliged to be able to demonstrate wisdom, which was one area in which they could feel confident they had the superior edge on the mainstreamed students. As a result, some found themselves questioning their own self-worth if they did not readily manage to demonstrate a wisdom that they felt deep down they should have. This “*should be*” their strength, where traditional academic qualifications, attractiveness, confidence, were seen, by all groups of student participants, to be strengths of the mainstreamed students.

Awareness of one’s mature status was evident in the term used in self-referral by a number of participants as “*The Grown-Up*”. The data revealed a self-perception which rendered the participant unwilling to show vulnerability or ask for help and referred back to this link with wisdom. The participants described the difficulties with young tutors:

*“Although I find him a very understanding and caring man, I felt utterly humiliated sitting in front of him asking for help. I know I was the mature one. I should be the one who is old enough to cope.” (Sarah; YMS)*

*“I think mature students have difficulty asking for help if they’re struggling. They assume that they are the ones that are supposed to cope and they find it embarrassing to ask.” (Anna, YMS)*

### 11.5.2 Attractiveness

In general the data showed that the participants equated the attainment of a degree as an authorisation of their increased self-esteem and sense of self-worth. However confidence was not increased in all aspects.

Attractiveness, inextricably interlinked with an acute awareness of age, although referred to by male participants, was fundamentally critical to the satisfaction of the female participants with the overall experience. When referring to the mainstreamed female students, the female participants observed their beauty or personal attractiveness. This generated anxiety with four of the 11 female participants (in all three groups) going on to describe the development of a poor self-image in terms of personal physical attractiveness over the period of study. Some females admitted their whole clothes sense had changed since entering HE, finding themselves dressing more “*adventurously*”, encouraged by, or feeling in comparison with, the clothes culture of the mainstreamed women:

*“Clothes – felt I had to dress better and started to wear make up. I don’t know if it is just because I am getting older but it helps me with my confidence at university.” (Pauline, M-LS)*

Another described times when she lost personal confidence:

*“The fashion parade culture doesn’t fit with me. I think it is easy for a woman, especially, to get very insecure and depressed. She can feel she’s losing her youth amongst the young people and is becoming “dowdy and dumpy”. Meanwhile the young students are “fresh faced and gorgeous”. (Lesley: YMS)*

*Pauline* felt that while in her home environment she had been regarded as smart and good-looking. At university she had lost personal confidence feeling unattractive compared to “*the beautiful Amazonian women*” around her. Taking this assessment beyond aspects of physical attraction to encompass intellectual abilities also, the

participants described generally feeling more “*special*” in their home surroundings prior to their engagement with HE.

### 11.5.3 Perception of Academic Ability

Within the academic environment, the sense of identity depended fundamentally on self-assessment of academic ability. Mercer (2007) has already shown that a changed sense of self is an outcome of an inter-related relationship between academic and personal growth. Prior to entry, six Mature students ranked their academic ability as being below the acceptable level for the University. Stories of the day they opened their acceptance letter were expressed in terms of astonishment and a common initial reaction following entry was that “*a mistake must have been made*”. Following entry, their low self-assessment of their academic capabilities (because they had taken longer to get to university) this became another reason to position themselves as peripheral:

*“I kept thinking the tutor will just be sitting there wishing that they hadn’t taken me for that place but some other younger person” (Sarah; YMS)*

The pressure to prove their academic ability, while deep down suspecting that they were not equal to the mainstreamed minds, in some cases, built up to a significant level of anxiety in the first semester of first year. However, there was one advantage; their low self-assessment was able to be corrected early on in the study journey by using the academic assessment at the end of the first semester. The marks in examinations gave clear evidence of academic ability in an inarguable, numerical, format. Ten of the participants commented that they felt the academic challenge presented to them was easier than they had expected:

*“It’s been worth it for my confidence because I can look at my first set of test exam results and know that I’m brighter than I thought. These gorgeous young bright things are in my class around me and actually, I’ve done better than them in many cases.” (Julia; M-LS)*

It is interesting to note that, even when addressing intelligence assessment, this woman still commented on physical attractiveness as a critical factor. On reflection,

although some participants may have always thought they had intellectual ability, they were now able to have confirmed measurement of that by an authority and an authority which has been recognised historically in terms of consistent academic credibility.

*“I already knew of the reputation of [the university]. .....I believed that it was the most difficult one to enter into.....I also believe it to be the best in academic subjects.....” (Alex, L-MS)*

The data linked the increased sense of academic competence evidenced, the better-than-expected performance results, adherence to educational values and a developing self-worth.

#### 11.5.4 Identity

Following on from Chapter 10’s examination of early readjustment of identity on arrival, the participants tracked the development of their identities throughout their courses. Changes in self-definition linked with the essentialist/non essentialist debate outlined in Chapter 5.

The participants in the YMS and M-LS categories thought it important that their decision to undertake a course of study was recognised as a demonstration of agency (Woodward and Ross, 2000). They recognised their ability to reconstruct their identity by entering different social, educational and cultural environments (in line with Bem and Allen, 1974; Markus and Nurius, 1986). Each participant in my study held the adamant belief that they were now exercising this ability in order to change their lives. Their increased confidence, where noted, rested primarily in their self-gratification that this was something they were doing for themselves. Even greater agency was displayed in the L-LS category, as these participants, with no job-seeking motivation, stood resolute, some against their partners, family and friends who trivialised their study.

Reay (1998) identified the crisis of personal identity which occurs in relation to working class women shortly after entering an HEI. My study data linked a critical factor in retention with the result of finding a sense of self with which participants can feel comfortable. This concept was shown to be certainly as important as the practical issues of finance, organisation of responsibilities or time, and academic ability (and, in some cases, more so).

Some participants had a real problem in associating themselves with the term “Mature”. *Lesley* described the problem of being a YMS. She went along to the Mature Student society, but found that the students over 30 tended to laugh at her and others of a similar age because they didn’t think they were “*real*” Mature students. She felt alienated by them as they referred to anyone under 30 as a “*young pup*”. However she didn’t “*fit in*” with the mainstreamed students either. The youth culture didn’t suit her – she was married and on a tight budget. She expressed a crisis of self-identity. This was supported by another participant:

*“They said I’m not really a Mature student. (I’m 23).But I’m not an ordinary undergraduate either. So where do I belong?” (Anna; YMS)*

Issues such as those expressed by my participants take us to the core of Social Identity Theory (Festinger, 1954; Tajfel, 1981) and some of the problems attached to pre-categorising individuals according to blanket descriptions such as “Mature”. My data was showing the completely different experiences for 22 year olds compared with 55 year olds. As the YMS participants expressed, they were at a disadvantage, feeling they could not be in “No Man’s Land” and engage fully with the learning process. If they had nothing with which to identify, then integration success was necessarily limited and, ultimately, retention was put at risk.

In the semi-structured interviews, the self-development process of Mature students was compared to that of mainstreamed students. Some participants were emphatic that their journey of change, in their view, far exceeded that of the mainstreamed students. Their reasoning was that change had been triggered by external

encounters. They felt that the interaction they had had, with alternating conditions between home and university, (on a frequent, if not daily, basis) demanded constant readjustment and reassessment. The frequency of the changing role was seen as a critical factor in compounding the sense of disorientation and this identification of frequency extends the literature in role definition. The mainstreamed students, meanwhile, were protected to some extent in their view by having to make the readjustment only once on arrival and then again at less frequent intervals, for example, at the end of term, offering them a less complex life. They were comparatively stable in between these points. This notion shares the perspective of the Deterministic Psychologists and Essentialist perspective of structure holding that the external influences determine our behaviour.

Although accepting that external influences will limit choice available, my own view cannot disallow the agency of the individual. A realistic comparison between Mature and mainstreamed students cannot be measured without further study but, nevertheless, the participants laid down significant markers in areas where fundamental changes in self-image had taken place through agency.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the potential for social mobility, essentially denied in the Marxist analysis of identity fixed by social class limitations, was not explicitly referred to by participants as a driving motivation behind their original engagement with HE. Referential links to a university degree with better employment prospects (Chapter 9) brought higher salaries into the equation. However the inference that more money consequentially brings higher social class (a concept questioned in Goldthorpe *et al*'s [1969] study [Chapter 4]) was not made by the participants. The class mobility aspect of university was said by some to be less of an issue now when approximately 50% of school-leavers enter the sector. Rather, it was seen as an essential and they did not want to be left behind or find themselves in a lower working class, perhaps even an "underclass", situation because they felt themselves to be "unqualified" in terms of educational credits. This was particularly linked to the YMS and lower-aged M-LS groups.

#### 11.5.5 Conflicts of Self

Duval & Wicklund (1972) differentiated between the subjective and the objective “*self*” stressing that when attention is focused outward it cannot be directed inwards at the same time. The state of objective self-awareness was demonstrated by comments in the interviews when participants talked of the “glimpses” they had of how others viewed them, thus describing the focus on the inner self and its effects. Examples included catching puzzled glances from loved-ones when new discourses and/or language were used which included words which would have been more appropriate in the university setting. Some were initially turned down by waiters and shopkeepers for student discount until a thorough inspection of a matriculation card was undertaken or queuing up with mainstreamed, students for a ticket (for example, for a musical event) at Orientation to be told, by someone of about 19 years old,

*“Sorry, these tickets are reserved for students only.....” (Julia, M-LS)*

The use of objective self-awareness can, indeed, determinedly increase self-consciousness negatively. This was particularly difficult for the YMSs who wanted to network. Acceptance by an “In-Group” network identified as a gain in terms of political acquaintances for employment in the future, while more powerful contacts were linked with status in society.

Subjective self-knowledge will be based on complex issues such as external cues and how these can be interpreted, or misinterpreted. One reason for the first semester being identified as a vulnerable time for Mature students was that this is a critical time to read the external cues from family on one hand, and fellow students on the other potentially leading to ambiguity at best, inadequacy at worst. Participants described examining cues for reassurance that they had made the right choice and that there was a role which they could assume in both settings which would prove comfortable rather than feeling identity role confusion (Erikson, 1965, as described in Chapter 5). The role confusion of participants was seen to settle and

harmonise towards the end of the first semester. This increased sense of comfort or confidence marked the time when academic assessments had been returned favourably, when fellow students in a similar age range were discovered and when discourses of the new setting were more familiar, and may be one factor in the reduction of attrition pace thereafter.

## **11.6 Key Findings**

This Chapter has drawn together the findings which focused on the final, and reflective, retrospective, stage of the student journey, and now groups them in terms of Retention (and its antithesis, Attrition), Academic Achievements, Measurement (Loss or Gain) and the Development of Self.

### 11.6.1 Retention/Attrition

A fundamental start to examining retention in HE involves the classic works of Tinto (1975) in the United States and, in the UK, of Yorke (2004, 2007). While Tinto's work was supported, Yorke's recent focus on active intervention at first year stage by the universities would seem, from my data, to be well judged. My study will offer some policy suggestions for institutional implementation at first year level (in Chapter 13). Walker's "philosophical" approach (1999) was particularly interesting when compared to my participants who failed to become fully integrated into either the academic or social life of the institution, and yet, somehow, still managed to avoid attrition. The prestigious nature of the degree (indicated by marketing publicity, the scarcity of admission places and, crucially, the age of the institution) would offer a reward worth remaining for.

#### 11.6.1.1 Considerations of withdrawal are usually in the first year

Participants considered withdrawal primarily in the first year supporting the literature (Christie *et al*, 2001; Christie & Munro, 2003; Yorke, 1998) but also stressed the importance of initial experiences in the first few weeks, supporting Pitkethly and Prosser (2001). This timing has logical reasoning behind it. My participants reported that first year role confusion had harmonised by the end of the

first year, discourses had become familiar with a discourse compromise at home established (if commuting), academic competency was assured and a peer group of like minds had been identified. I would suggest that intervention by the institution to speed this process up should be aimed at these areas of conflict (again, see Chapter 13).

11.6.1.2 If considering withdrawal, these Mature students tended to be solution-focused.

There was a clear contradiction of the students' behaviours. If confronted by challenging mainstreamed students or staff they tended to withdraw from the situation and even, in extreme cases, consider withdrawal from the institution. However, if facing personally challenging situations, they would find pragmatic solutions to what they viewed as temporary problems in the determination to remain. It took relatively little practical support to dissuade them from institutional attrition, partly influenced by their particular university's strong culture of retention, supporting Pace (1994) and Pascarella (1980) observing the placing of university environment as a retention influence.

11.6.1.3 It is critical for the student participants to "Save Face"

A critical force for retention is the avoidance of loss of face, respecting the numbers of other people involved in the decision to attend (family, friends, employers, other students). For my participants, the proving to others was inextricably woven with proving to oneself supporting Waters and Gibson's (2001) identification of "*Psychosocial Influences*".

11.6.1.4 Attrition may be influenced by external factors, but not academic weakness

Supporting Christie *et al*, (2004), there was no evidence attrition is directly linked to academic weakness alone. However, Christie *et al* (2004) suggested under-reporting could be instrumental in the recording of this as a cause. My study caught the participants at an earlier stage, potentially considering withdrawal before they

acted on the impulse and yet the data showed that thoughts of withdrawal were consistently due to external, practical, burdens such as health, childcare issues, transport or financial difficulties. There was no link found with their being intellectually and academically challenged beyond their capabilities; in fact, quite the contrary. If an unexpected low mark was received, the student participants rose to the challenge and became more determined.

#### 11.6.2 Academic Achievements

##### 11.6.2.1 The student participants' values were reassessed post-entry

These Mature students generally underestimated their academic capability on entry. This led to increasing anxiety during first semester, but they had all been relieved at the assessment from first semester exams. I would suggest that, in an attempt to regain a sense of self, the Mature students entering the new arena of university attempted to attain a position of respect from mainstreamed students and staff. To do so, they used status in the currency of that new environment, *i.e.* academic credits. The data confirmed that, as academic ability was recognised by the institution objectively, the individual reported a direct growth in confidence and perceived themselves as more included, and in a higher status within that new arena.

##### 11.6.2.2. The student participants aimed high academically

Although my study does not extend to the quantitative comparison between Mature and mainstreamed students' actual academic achievements, it would seem that the participants aimed high academically, being unhappy to settle for a minimal, or even average, pass. The intense focus on study highlighted by Lumb and Vail (2004) and the motivation by Archer *et al*, (1999) were demonstrated, and were inextricably woven with the element of sacrifice made. However, once again, the Mainstream benchmark is not covered in this study.

### 11.6.2.3 External considerations dictate academic choices

When the participants chose their targets (including institution and subject) they were mindful of their external and practical burdens which regularly interfered and adjusted the choices available (supporting Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). The agency of the individuals was thus expressed, with the external burdens an example of the structures of a Mature student's life.

### 11.6.3 Measurement: Loss or Gain?

In gauging success of the experience, objective measurement of one student against another is futile, given the individual-specific criteria influencing the outcome. However, in this study, using retrospective self-reflection, the participants, using their own criteria to guide their own assessment, identified areas of loss and gain. Common features have emerged:

#### 11.6.3.1 Loss of financial security.

Lunden's (1932) observation of the scholastic disinterest in financial enablement to study, although based on medieval ages, is reflected in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the Ancient institution of this study, the staff seem scarcely informed about the financial difficulties of Mature students. The Ancient university is able to benefit from trust funds to alleviate some financial hardship for non-traditional students, giving the students there an advantage over newer institutions, a point not raised by some of the research in this area (Thomas, 2001; Woodward, 2000).

#### 11.6.3.2 Loss of partnership.

This loss, although already featuring in some literature (heavily supporting the work of Berman Brown, 2006) may not have had enough emphasis at that time because the participants in this study raised it as the most difficult. However, my own study has raised a critical question. Did the course stress the partnership, or did the course offer a route of escape to an already stressed and fragile partnership? This study's focus on "Escape" as a motivation for engagement in the first place raises

the question as to whether more is saved than is lost in the course of the study programme.

#### 11.6.3.3. Loss of close family relations.

Obligation felt by the YMS participants to their parents is perhaps comparable with that felt by mainstreamed students (although not tested in this study). However, the obligation to partners and dependents (children and parents) was felt acutely. An additional potential loss, not highlighted in the literature, was that of the YMS who had student loans to pay back, had to consider highly paid work or further study immediately thereafter, but who therefore had to sacrifice reproductive years. As they watched the years of child-bearing slip by they were concerned that they would not have time to fit in creating a family. The gain of new relationships did, however, offer some balance to these losses.

#### 11.6.3.4 Gain of new relationships.

The gain of “Fraternity” was an interesting bonus of study at any age, but was noted as core to the experience of one Mature student who learned at a very mature age. Some literature about this group of learners is beginning to emerge (O’Dowd, 2005) but, given the focus on Lifelong learning, more is needed and my study could offer a little here. A useful link is created in my study between a justification of funding L-LSs and Sennett’s (2006) concept of “*usefulness*”. However, in balance, an acute loss (or awareness of poor) relationships at home was experienced by all L-LS participants.

#### 11.6.3.5. Gain of academic competence

By far and away the most important gain, voiced by all participants, can be summarised in the term “academic competence”. This heading does not only cover academic credits, but also describes the development of a general thirst for knowledge right from the entry to an Access course or in first year. It also covers the gaining of academic skills, for example, essay writing, presentation delivery, critically thinking. Specialist streams, e.g. Access courses, engaged the Mature

students with the ethos of lifelong learning which, consequentially, encouraged higher academic aims.

#### 11.6.3.6. “Vocational” versus “Employability”

The student participants recognised a clear division between “vocational” courses and developing “employability”. All participants identified Ancients as delivering the latter. However the distinction, (relating to Newman; 1860), may have been less easily understood by the student participants if they had not experienced the learning culture of an Ancient.

#### 11.6.3.7. Part-completion

Supporting Christie *et al*'s (2004) observation that even partial completion of a degree can be useful, my participants developed their confidence and their self-image as they progressed, not waiting right till the end to deem success. Additionally, in my study the legacy of this value of academic competency has already been passed on to child dependents, developing an ethos of education within a family which will create a long term benefit.

### 11.6.4 The Development of “Self”

#### 11.6.4.1 The lasting importance of a harmonious “Self”

Finding a sense of self within their new role was seen as being as influential a factor on retention as practical issues such as finance, time or academic ability. This is covered, to some degree, in the integration literature which identifies sense of belonging (e.g. Connell & Wellborn, 1991), the “Fit” theorists (e.g. Chatman, 1989) and the harmonising of self-identity and role confusion (Kember *et al*, 2001). However, a possible addition in my study acknowledges the importance of being comfortable with the placing of “self” in terms to the other, nevertheless, urgent pressures. The difference may be the chronic, relentless nature of the feeling of disharmony of self, while the other pressures may be more periodic.

#### 11.6.4.2 The limiting of agency

The YMS and M-LS categories used application to university to exercise agency, a tool in their self-determined process to change their lives. However, once at the institution, the limitations of agency were not insignificant, challenged by both institutional and domestic structures. Nevertheless it can be seen that agency was seen to develop in the methods and priorities of juggling the two lifestyles.

#### 11.6.4.3 The YMS participants form the most vulnerable group

Murphy and Roopchand's (2003) identification of female Mature students as vulnerable was extended to particularly focus on YMS participants. These participants had a confused identity; they were *young* but *not young enough*. They were assumed to be part of the "In-Group" with mainstreamed students but the culture of the mainstream, for example, drinking excessively and lack of independent life experience, jarred with the Mature students. These students were sub-categorised as the most vulnerable in my study, an important addition to the literature in informing policy and institutional practice.

#### 11.6.4.4 Female participants' physical self-image

In a further extension to Murphy and Roopchand (2003), a critical finding was that, in particular, the YMS and M-LS women in the study report loss of self-esteem and ensuing loneliness based on physical attractiveness, in self-confessed comparison with mainstreamed young women. This loss of self-esteem affected their overall student experience negatively. Although not found in other literature so far, it was raised regularly and with significant priority by the student participants in interview (possibly easier with a female interviewer).

#### 11.6.4.5 Self-esteem sometimes heightened in the domestic setting

Some participants felt more "special" in their home surroundings and the HE environment actually lowered their self-confidence since the benchmark around them, their peer group in their new academic environment, had risen in terms of academic capability and physical attractiveness. This comparison of their own

standards against those of others around them, resulting in a consequential self-image of their positioning, is an example of Social Constructionism at work.

#### 11.6.4.6. A Degree did not equal an automatic rise in social class

The change of social classification was not identified as an expected outcome of university (relating to Goldthorpe, [1969]), but it was accepted as a way of not declining in the social class stakes in a population where almost 50% were gaining degrees. I should argue, however, that challenges to social norms must be experienced more at a university where 93% of students are residential and the immersion of the student in the new environment is more influential.

This ends the main data discussion, focusing on the three stages of student and university interaction. Drawing the study together, the final section uses these findings and, relating them back to the questions, areas of theoretical debate and literature in the earlier part of the thesis, presents conclusions in three different formats.

## PART V – SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the original driver was personal, to maintain commitment to the project I looked to identify wider contributions offered by the work. The threads of the findings and discussions are now drawn together into this final part, V, offering three lenses through which to examine the observations of this study.

In Chapter 12 I address the original research question and, acknowledging the past literature, I consider my study's contributions in four different areas: theory, practical management, methodology and political debate<sup>33</sup>. To conclude this chapter I identify the limitations of the study, the gaps that still remain and offer some suggestions for future research.

Chapter 13 then offers a series of narratives, constructions of the “Mature Student”, using my data to create a fictional outline of a person in each category.

In a final conclusion, taking a personal lens, I offer a statement, summarising my own perspective on what this thesis might offer and, in the spirit of Social Constructionism, how the process of investigation has been interpreted by me.

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<sup>33</sup> Appendix 13 provides a fuller table outlining the contributions offered in these areas throughout the study.

## Chapter 12

### Contributions and Gaps: Indicators for Future Research?

#### **12.1 Introduction**

Data findings may be of use in a number of ways:

- The findings can add to our theoretical understanding, encouraging incremental knowledge and expanding, or contesting, existing arguments, but can also build toward alternative theories.
- The decisions or practical action taken by management can be informed through the data.
- The study can add to a body of methodological application in terms of how the research was undertaken.
- Since the findings use terms which are open to “interpretation” (and thereby, as I have shown with the constructionist approach, influenced by personal factors), they could be used politically. This study has its roots in the political debate surrounding the introduction of diversity to ancient universities. It seems appropriate that we should end on examination of what this study adds to that debate.

With this in mind, this chapter summarises the nature of my contributions, to Theoretical Knowledge, Practical Management, Methodological Application and Political Debate. The summary is taken from Appendix 13, a fuller table of the contributions offered in the study. These are drawn together from the information offered in Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11.

#### **12.2 Theoretical Knowledge**

##### **12.2.1 Sub-Classification of the Mature Student**

The three-way sub-classification is a fundamental theoretical contribution, carrying suggestions for Practical Management also. The three groups have been driven by emerging data from the themes of the student journey (including expectations, motivation, integration, external responsibilities, residential status etc.) The

classification has been adjusted from Havigurst's (1952) classification of adulthood stages. At study commencement I had no intention of using such an obvious categorising factor as age in crude years. If following Social Identity Theory other demographics could have been considered including gender, and social class, or even the characteristic of personality (Furnham and McManus, 2004). Brown *et al* (2005) however, introduced the possibility of utilising functions, purposes or drives. Examining this in relation to my study, I found the most helpful sub-classification of values, beliefs, and cultures (expressed through the themes outlined above) had a thread of commonality in terms of age clusters.

The whole spectrum of Mature students were shown to be too wide an age range to be defined as a homogenous group (supporting the findings of Waller [2006]). The three-way classification fitted well with the attitudes, family circumstances, obligations, and aspirations of each group. However, it was not an exact application, carrying some exemptions; for example, a L-LS participant with sympathy of the M-LS category in terms of travel problems, the YMS with family dependents similar to the M-LS, and the L-LS who arrived with expectations of finding friends similar to the YMSs. Nevertheless, the similarities significantly outweighed the contradictions of this classification and the broad general identification encapsulated the psychological development and responsibilities of the participants and reflected their needs at different age stages.

#### 12.2.2 Research Development Pattern

In the process of researching this area, a pattern of the Mature student research in the literature has been identified:

Stage 1 – Mature students are monitored in terms of proactive (often Government) initiatives designed for the specific purpose of incorporating higher mature numbers. For example, analyses of the success of “Access” courses emerged as a research area and the tracking of the success of students within provided the loci for

such research (Bird and Crawley, 1993; Blicharski, 1999; Hall, 1998; Munn *et al*, 1993; Walker; 2000).

Stage 2 then followed those Mature students once integrated into the mainstream, but predominantly in the role of learners.

Stage 3 focused once again on specialist programmes where the Mature students are taught alongside mainstreamed. However examples found are in specialist courses, usually health-related, (Robotham & Julian, 2006), and still explored only background influence on academic performance.

This study's contribution extends the research through to the next stage. By introducing the students' views on Higher Education agendas, on their university and on themselves and each other, on their lives at home, a holistic approach explores how they understand the experience, what it means to them, encompassing wider gains than academic ones alone<sup>34</sup>.

### 12.2.3 Participants' Perception of Purpose

There was scant literature expressing opinions on university purpose which had been taken from the perspective of the student user (a noted exception being Tett, [2000]). The findings in this study highlighted the mismatch between the staff and student groups' perceptions of purpose, although a united acceptance of the interdependency of purposes was acknowledged (supporting Jaspers, 1960). Mature students in the first two categories (*i.e.* under 50) viewed the purpose as equipping for employment. They prioritised “*teaching*” as the key purpose with “*knowledge transfer*” as second, both mismatching with that of the academic staff which focused on “*research*”. The institutional Governors, meanwhile, were further at odds by prioritising “*Societal Betterment*”; all other groups agreed that, although the universities could assist people development, they had no responsibility for

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<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that this door has very recently been opened by Christie *et al*, [2007] although focusing on a broader group of non-traditional students than purely Mature.

ensuring a “*Good Society*” was created out of “*Good Individuals*”, concurrent with Newman’s “*Idea of a University*” (1860), while the Foucauldian (1980) implication of institutional manipulation sat uncomfortably. There was a specific link with the outward-facing YMSs, however, who sought employment after study in an environment where they could “*make a difference to the world*”, feeling useful to society. This contribution to university purpose literature has been described as “*Ideology*”.

#### 12.2.4 Student Motivations

Student motivation literature (e.g. Archer, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2001) has been expanded to include a further distinct category labelled “*Escape*”. University filled a role as an escape route from an old life, or a doorway to a new one, offering new friends, network of contacts, and interpretations of their world. In spite of structural barriers, the student participants had found a way to exercise agency, redirecting their lives, but with no little sacrifice. They had some sympathy with Ellis’s (1994) description of the elitist culture of Ancients, but having subscribed to this model, believed that a degree from an Ancient university is superior currency in the employment market and, having been accepted into the university, developed, unsurprisingly, a stake in ensuring that the elitist propaganda continued. Post-entry, in a further subscription to institutional values, a subtle transference took place as their motivational drive moved from vocationalism to knowledge acquisition, thereby enhancing employability.

#### 12.2.5 The Advantages of Diversity

The literature of the Crisis Theorists in the 1980s (Fulton, 1989; Halsey, 1987; Trow, 1987) focused on the added difficulties for universities to deal with an intake of diverse students. Adding to this, my study has documented the academic practitioners’ pleasure at having Mature students in their class. Advantages identified include bridging staff and mainstreamed students, expanding the richness of debate in classes and contributing breadth of life experience to the mainstreamed learning experience. As discussed in Chapter 9, the Mature student beliefs on

education and search for wider intellectual exploration fitted well with the philosophy of Academics in all but one aspect, they would not take the principle of academic freedom as far as Academics.

#### 12.2.6 Staff/Student Relations

Although documented in the literature these relations are seldom viewed through a personal perspective, rather fixing them clearly in their roles as teacher and learner. In addition, little is written on relations with administrative staff and my study further takes the examination to differentiate between the three classifications.

In general, academic staff found working with Mature students particularly rewarding. However, there are some specifics worth identifying: YMS participants and young, junior academic staff expressed tensions, with each having difficulty recognising the others' authority (in terms of intellectual credibility or life-experience). The M-LS participants identified junior staff as their peers and, where they socialised at all, it was with this group they chose to socialise. Some staff questioned the validity of inclusion of L-LS participants in the mainstreamed university context, although they, in general, found them enjoyable to work with.

#### 12.2.7 Social Integration

Stepping one stage back from focusing on the integration process itself, the contribution of this study is in the identification of the three-way differentiated *wish* to integrate. In line with the Fit Studies (Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987), and the student experience literature (Archer *et al*, 2003; Reay, 2003) students identified people with whom they shared characteristics and bonded with them. Focusing on another non-traditional set of students, Tett (2004) emphasises working class students need assistance from the institution to minimise existing inequalities and facilitate integration, especially in a format which does not pathologise the students.

My study adds on to the work of Duquette (2000) in cautioning that not all students wish to integrate in social terms. Although working with yet another non-

traditional group, (Disabled students in Canada), Duquette found they focused on the academic, rather than the social, integration. Substantial institutional resources are now being assigned to assist social integration of all non-traditional students. Taking the views of the three different student participant categories (expanding Duquette's findings), questions are raised as to whether these resources are wasted or taking up staff time inappropriately.

Duquette's findings, also qualitative, were not supported by the three categories across the board; each of the three age categories approached integration with a clear, but different, expectation and was a further example of the non-essentialist aspect of the term "Mature". The M-LS participants, as with Duquette's sample, identified socially with their home environment and not at university. The YMS participants expected to be part of the mainstreamed "In-Group" and were, to varying degrees, resentful and unhappy when they found they were categorised firmly as the "Out-Group" and would have benefited immensely from an institutional move to answer Tett's (2004) call for facilitation. On the contrary, the L-LS participants had always expected to be the "Out-Group" and were astonished, but pleased, to discover that soon after arrival they were welcomed to the mainstreamed "In-Group" as a valued eccentric element to the group. They reported the social integration as being core to the experience for them (referring to their declared initial motivation as seeking interest and companionship).

#### 12.2.8 Retention

Once again focusing on the thought processes and impulses behind the decisions, this study has not repeated the well-documented retention work, (Tinto, 1975; Yorke, 1998), but has focused on why, when considering withdrawal, students make the conscious decision to stay. The literature predominantly provided quantitative information comparing those retained with those withdrawing. There have been calls for recognition that academic weakness cannot be used as an excuse for student withdrawal (Christie *et al*, 2004) and this finding was supported in my

study. The work in this area adds to the theoretical debate, No. 4, “*The Successful Student Experience*” identified in Chapter 1.

The vast majority of the participants had considered withdrawal at one point. Their life experience, however, directed them to being “solution-focused” finding relatively simple practical assistance over temporary hurdles would be enough. However, their life experience was also interpreted as a label of being able to cope, and so they failed to report when they were in difficulties. Psychological factors seem to have been the greatest influences for retention, retaining self-esteem and “*saving face*”. The investment of family, in time, support and finances, was also a large factor in the student refusing to leave.

#### 12.2.9 Loss and Gain

Berman Brown (2006) had already identified the loss of marital harmony through the strain of studying. Once again my study, using a qualitative methodology, tried to offer more in terms of understanding the reasons behind the breakdown, the link with mixed discourses; jealousy of time spent elsewhere and, particularly with Late-life students, explored the reaction of partners viewing the participants’ study as a “*selfish hobby*”. It also covered the possibility that it was not a loss at all, but, considering the “Escape” motivation, the relationship may not have been there in the first place.

#### 12.2.10 Student Identity

The participants stated their reluctance to identify with the ageist term “Mature”, associating it with “Slow” and encapsulating too broad an age-range to provide a culture of belonging or a shared belief base as a homogeneous group (across all three categories). The resolution of identity had to be achieved with effort when, just after arrival, Mature students found themselves positioned by other mainstream students in an “Out-Group” (linking to [Allport, 1954; Turner *et al*, 1994]). Their knocked self-confidence was slowly re-established through the adoption of mainstream norms. Acceptance by the academic community was established

through their recognised competency on a recognised “intellectual” scale. However the term “academic competency” also includes new skills in terms of presentation, critical thinking, organisation, and confidence to tackle new challenges. The participants’ process of redefinition as intellectual beings joins the debate area No. 3 “*Studying People*” in Chapter 1; in particular those conversations on “*Identity*”. One particularly poignant aspect of identity was uncovered. The female students, across the board, reported a loss in perceived attractiveness. It may be that this cannot be avoided, since they are comparing themselves with young females within a societal context where youth is equated with attractiveness. However, the readjusted value classification rating intellectual capability boosted confidence as time progressed.

#### 12.2.11 Value Congruence

Once within the institution, the student participants embraced and defended the intellectual challenge values and set high academic targets for themselves. However they did highlight personal limits to the concept of “Academic Freedom” seeing that academic exploration carries a societal accountability. It is important to remember, however, that this study only concentrates on the students who remain, with a presumption of having accepted the institutional values.

#### 12.2.12 Summary of Theoretical Contributions:

- The study of Mature students benefits from the sub-classification of subjects into three sub-categories, according to themes within the experience journey (12.2.1).
- The pattern of research development has been extended to include both a subjective and objective, but certainly holistic, view of Mature students (see 12.2.2).
- Views of staff and Mature students on institutional purpose are mismatched. Students still relate a degree with a direct link to employment and financial betterment. Staff view their role as

developing agency, critical thinking and, as a secondary consequence, may contribute to “employability” (12.2.3).

- “Escape” is an additional classification to the student motivational literature (12.2.4)
- Diversity carries advantages, recognised by Academics in particular, as Mature students fit with their underlying philosophy of intellectual exploration (12.2.5)
- The three student sub-categories relate differently to staff; the YMS had tensions with junior staff who, in turn were recognised as peers by the M-LS (12.2.6).
- Integration literature has neglected to examine the participants’ *wish* to integrate (with the exception of Duquette, 2000). The three groups had differing perspectives: YMS yearned to; M-LS had no wish to, while L-LS integrated well, much to their surprise (12.2.7).
- The study offers data on participants who have considered withdrawing, but have changed their minds (12.2.8).
- In terms of loss/gain, the literature documenting loss of close relationships begs challenge that the relationship may not be strong in the first place. (12.2.9).
- Students, losing confidence shortly after arrival (comparing themselves to mainstreamed students as physically unattractive [females] and “*slow*”), regained their self-esteem by re-defining themselves in terms of intellectual capabilities.(12.2.10)
- Once within the institution, participants grew to share values with the staff, valuing intellectual challenge (although drawing the line at *absolute* Academic Freedom.) However the scope of this study did not include those who left and therefore congruence with the institutional values may be a pre-requisite of those retained. (12.2.11)

Although theoretical insight satisfies the researcher part of my identity, in my work role I was encouraged to identify some indications for practical policy improvements for the institution.

### **12.3 Practical Management**

The data contribution to practical institutional and policy management has been subdivided into the three classifications within the interactive journey used throughout this study: Purpose, Bonding and Reflection.

#### 12.3.1 Purpose

At the point of university engagement, both parties in the interaction, student and university, need to be clear about what they expect to gain from the experience, with realistic targets being set for both.

Marks (2000) found universities unattractive to male breadwinners and my data would support this; of the only two male students in the M-LS category, neither had given up employment to enter university and the females in this category outnumbered the males, in a 2:1 ratio. This goes right to the heart of the original trigger for my study as the graduate in the introduction (*Harry*) felt disappointment at the failure of his graduate life in improved employment terms. Universities are now judged by Funding Councils in terms of not only retention statistics but of student satisfaction ratings taken throughout the experience. A focus on enhancing that experience would seem to be increasingly sensible for HE managers.

Institutions risk incurring severe penalties if expectations are not managed by them right from the start. It would seem that the encouragement to study has been sold to the public in terms of monetary gain and “better” employment, particularly in terms of higher fiscal reward. Once again, taking the emphasis from the degree reward in the promotional material and placing it on the gaining of self-development throughout the journey, would go some way to managing these expectations.

Prior to admission, the terms of the institutional contractual offer has to be clearly defined and presented in a way that ensures that a partnership in learning is made on a fully informed basis. The Mature student has often made considerably more sacrifice or investment than mainstreamed students and, therefore, enters the institution in a more “*serious*” frame of mind. One suggestion for Mature students would be the provision of an institutional advisory meeting, including a careers element, prior to application to or arrival at the institution. For the participants in my study, a meeting of this sort would have helped identify and link the relevance of university to a particular student’s circumstances and personal targets and what could be realised from the interaction between the two. While it would be better for this to be undertaken in neutral ground (for example, independent careers agencies), it nevertheless would be welcomed by institutional staff expressing anxieties about inappropriate recruitment.

Currently, somebody (recruiter, initial adviser, tutor, and marketer) who is recognised as an institutional representative is validating the applicant student’s belief that he/she “belongs” there, a vital aspect of the engagement stage. However, promises are made at that point; undertakings committed. My data also reminded us that, in the early stages of engagement, the word of *any* institutional representative is taken as authority; wardens, university secretaries, first year postgraduate tutors. It is therefore an important recommendation that the institution train secretaries, administrative staff, academic staff etc. be aware of the “promises” they could be perceived as making (unconsciously) on behalf of the whole institution. Further training of staff to encourage helpful interaction, and, importantly, of an appropriate tone with Mature students would also be beneficial. Mature students are not pre-disposed to engage with the institution beyond the course work if initial forays into the broader aspects of the university culture are met with less than enthusiastic and sometimes even unhelpful ‘gatekeeping’ responses.

Taking the effects of the personal recommendation further, alumni have developed a stronger stakeholder role, thus giving current students the strength of position as future alumni. My study reminds institutional management that today's student will, tomorrow, be the teacher, the FE College tutor, the private mentor; all contributing towards the construction of the social relevance of a university education which links future applicants with their dream and reinforcement of self-worth.

### 12.3.2 Bonding

Given the discussion on social integration facilitation (12.2.7), policy implications vary. The life experience of YMS participants was only a few chronological years' difference from the mainstreamed students. However this particular period of development from childhood to independence is a crucial one and the gap is disproportionate. To assume that they could all then be treated as adolescents was a regular mistake. Their maturity demanded recognition, in, for example, residential accommodation provision; they identified more similarities with the norms and life habits of the postgraduate students and looked to a re-classification to allow shared accommodation.

The oscillating environments of home and university caused problems for the students commuting from home. The element of change is added to the debate in Chapter 1 surrounding "*Identity*", as the student participants struggled to self-categorise in their alternating environments. The ambiguity of their home and study lives seeks harmonisation starting with an establishment of space in both environments. Although the ideal experience was seen as one of attending the university and absorbing themselves in the intellectual culture, the reality of daily responsibilities, for example dependents and transport difficulties, had to be accommodated and these could be alleviated if more materials for learning were on-line. This, of course, has implications for mainstreamed students' access to similar material, but this is an area where Further Education colleges and Modern, Post-1992 universities have progressed already.

“Commuter” therefore became another term of difference which, given the residential criteria as implicit to a full experience, had problematic influences on identity and integration. Nevertheless, an anomaly was highlighted; if the commuting status is “normalised” and the student then takes up residence in a hall of residence, at that point the age definition becomes the primary factor placing the person into a clear “Out-Group”.

Harmonisation had to take place in the home environment also. It was important for Mature students to have their families and spouses involved in the orientation experience and for the institution to provide information packages for these important loved ones to help them understand the challenges being faced by the students and to be part of that experience in terms of shared discourses etc. On an ongoing basis they must be included in some of the engagement activities as their partner’s university life progressed. The institution should not interact with the students in terms of a presumption of single status (as with mainstreamed). There is a need to acknowledge the link between family support and Mature student retention.

Practical suggestions for facilitating the interaction between Mature students and the institution were varied, but, no matter how trivial they may seem to the objective viewer, some participants considered them essential. Student participants wanted:

- More integration initiatives for YMS, including more groupwork opportunities (denied by M-LS participants who found groupwork a negative experience).
- A more thorough advising interview at the beginning of every year; an interview which acknowledges the pressures of life balance for the student and guides course choices, timetabling, external responsibilities and internal restraints.

- Bursary payments moved to very early days (ideally prior to arrival) in order to facilitate integration. Staged payments were not seen as helpful and assumed control of finances on students who were easily capable of budgeting.
- Emphasis on institutional negotiation with transport agencies. It was felt that transport difficulties for commuting students are underestimated.
- Provision of institutional assistance for private car use. Examples included a car pooling system established by the University or a fund for financial assistance in the case of car repair needed. This reflected the university's rural position.
- Intermittent overnight accommodation was thought to be helpful for those wanting to take part occasionally in social events in the evening.

If, as the data indicated, relatively simple practical assistance could help the students overcome temporary hurdles, the reverse is also the case; some simple, practical hurdles, if not overcome, could lead to attrition. What actually led to actual withdrawal, however, was within the scope of this study. However, it is known through my professional role that exit interviews were neither systematically implemented nor utilised to their full potential within the institution. The introduction of a system outlining reasons in more than the current Registry classification of either (1) personal or (2) medical could prove informative to design future assistance of students to surmount these temporary barriers.

### 12.3.3 Reflection

An important contribution to policy information on bonding focuses on the classification of the three different sub-groups each shown to demand a tailored response from the institution: The YMSs felt the most peripheral and expressed dissatisfaction, showing themselves to be in many ways the most vulnerable, and all seemed to yearn for integration; the M-LS participants carried the greatest external responsibilities and yearned for academic challenge within a flexible framework;

the L-LS participants were the most satisfied, but needed understanding for their personal challenges including relationships and health.

Any inferential leap made between mature age and self-confidence, perhaps based on life experience, was not reflected in the academic environment. The students generally reported underestimations of their academic abilities. They also carried expectations of independence and capability with them, so they did not readily ask for advice. The participants asked that teaching staff be made aware that the use of the elite label, along with Ancient status, inferred a superior status to the participants, sometimes, paradoxically, leading to students feeling unworthy of attendance, thus lowering self-confidence at the entrance stage. However, counteracting that, the inference of the degree with increased value made it worth their while to engage. Critically, it would seem appropriate for the highlighted self-development gains to be publicised to ensure they are a central consideration for students at that decision stage. The initial lack of self-confidence influenced the low sense of agency to my participants, especially in the sub-honours years at the institution. They guarded their responses in questionnaires and, placed themselves as peripheral to the main action in the institution. Therefore, while their opinions would have been valuable, they would not offer them readily, this leading me to a recommendation that an active seeking of opinions is preferable to a passive response.

If Mature students are to be recruited, focused attention needs to be given to their readjustment shortly after entry, including starting up their academic engines in the study environment (Griffiths *et al*, 2005). The use of specialised programmes such as a summer school, Access or part-time evening degree programme, partly introduced to address this, came across in the data as a double-edged sword. The by-product of the possible stigmatisation of students once labelled “special” was the creation of a group identity. This group may have been placed on the social periphery when entering the mainstreamed student body, but by sharing the experience of that position with others, it formed another group, although the

potential ability for the institution or mainstreamed body to “pathologise” (Tett, 2004) it had to be avoided. Achieving the balance between the two could be the critical factor influencing retention in many cases.

#### 12.3.4 Summary of Practical Management Contributions:

- Institutional purpose should also be clarified and publicised. It was the view of all participants that inferences relating this Ancient to any skills training should be avoided and that the development of individual agency should be heightened (12.3.1).
- Institutional review should refocus targets on facilitating a good experience, rather than limiting ourselves to ticking a quantitative retention box, is recommended for *all* students (12.3.1).
- Individual expectations need to be managed. Pre-application (or immediately post application) advising is required, either by an independent body or, if necessary, (and although potentially biased), the institution (12.3.1).
- The highlighted self-development gains should be publicised to ensure they are a central consideration for students at the stage of deciding to engage (12.3.1).
- A personal mentor with knowledge of the institution was identified by the participant at their point of application, verifying their validity to apply (12.3.1).
- Staff would benefit from training in the specifics of working with Mature students. This will take into account structural complications (e.g. transport) and the appropriate response by administrative staff (12.3.1).
- The home and university roles need harmonising; the university should be in direct communication with families of the Mature students (12.3.2).
- Practical suggestions which would help Mature students are listed (12.3.2).
- YMS participants had the poorest experience and need particular institution focus to facilitate integration (12.3.3). Review of their residential arrangements should be undertaken (12.3.2).

- To retain a solution-focused Mature student, pragmatic and practical assistance has to be offered. However all Mature students noted a reluctance to report difficulties. Communication routes should be investigated by the institution with a more proactive role being taken by the institution to monitor the Mature students' wellbeing (12.3.3).

On a cautionary note, I am mindful that there is an argument, (underpinning philosophies of universities; Chapter 3), that if something has to be proven “useful” all the time, we risk seriously undermining the creation of ideas. The exposure of ideas in these areas may stimulate further debate, or offer incremental conceptualisation rather than coming up with straightforward and immediate answers.

Turning now to the theoretical debate No. 5 in Chapter 1, “*Methodologies*” I now examine how the methodology of the study contributes to that debate.

#### **12.4 Methodological Application**

As discussed in Chapter 8, Brunsdon, Davies *et al* (2000) claimed that Interactionist approaches are more fulfilling than adopting a Positivist approach. This view supports the validity of identifying one approach as superior over another but still fails to recognise the applicability of a particular method according to the aims of the study and the material being studied. The superiority of the qualitative or quantitative approach is a debate that continues.

One methodological contribution of this study is the account from the perspective of someone inside the debate, coming to believe a qualitative study was required to provide a richness of data offering insight to the “how” and “why” questions which were raised, by my study. The journey changed my personal perspective on methodologies from having been previously somewhat dismissive of the qualitative approach. I would now defend the view of qualitative and quantitative as equally viable, and often complementary, methods but fulfilling very different functions.

This was a significant discovery for me, but was a lesson hard learned after many failed attempts at using the wrong tools to manage, and interrogate, the data.

The transformation of the student participants' selves, as they journeyed through their study experience changed their values and their views on what was worthy. Therefore, qualitative studies which assessed value in terms of acquisition of a degree or retention (e.g. Yorke, 2001) or monetary recompense in graduate employment (Purcell, 2007), failed to take the subtleties of participants' self-development and changing targets into account. My qualitative approach tracked these subtleties, but also benefited from the privacy of journal entry to express deeply felt, and recounted, emotions.

#### 12.4.1 Students' Personal Journals

As I identified in Chapter 8, the advantages of using journals has already been outlined in the literature (Bolger *et al*, 2003) as providing accurate, timely recordings which go into detail tracking mood changes throughout, rather than just retrospective or mean representations. However, further advantages of using journals were identified as providing assistance to the participants in self-reflecting and identifying their future goals. In fact, some described the journal as a "self-counselling" tool. This was not an obvious effect of this method identified at point of selection. For many of the students the journal became a purpose in itself as some discussed feeling supported by the process leading to some emotion during difficult times in the study period. Indeed four students continued to maintain their journal routine even after the study period was over. Sharing interpretations with participants in the Hawthorne experiments over 50 years ago (Mayo, 1949), they found great benefit in having someone taking an interest in their thoughts offering validity for their opinions. Journals also had the advantage of offering participants a freedom of format which allowed individual expression. They developed a richness of data since participants were able to build what they felt was a personal relationship with the journal, maintaining complete control over their entries, and

this allowed them to express quite private details which they would not have felt comfortable about expressing in an initial interview. Thus, having used the journal as an icebreaker, they were then ready to expand on their experience in a personal interview.

#### 12.4.2 Interview Atmosphere

A consequence of the journals, and the intimacy of the personal thoughts and opinions which were being revealed, necessitated the provision of “safe space” for the subsequent interview, somewhere in the participants’ control. Interviews were held in coffee shops, hotel lounges, neutral office space. Staff met in my office, their office, local restaurants. I had expected formality to encourage an atmosphere of researcher detachment and, implied safety, but I found that the most informal venues drew out the richest data.

I highlighted the critical factor of control: that of the participant, in terms of venue, timing, position in the room. I found the use of audio taping immediately threatened the participants in all categories, forcing them into a position where they felt exposed. The interviews were noted in “my own” shorthand and, once transcribed, returned to the participants for checking. I was particularly aware of my official position at this point, and therefore, avoiding any inadvertent bias, I needed their checking. However, simultaneously, it returned control of the information to them. The data was especially sensitive when exploring the effect of study on relationships. Audio taping necessitated, what they considered to be, an unreasonable level of trust in the researcher; it gave me permanent possession of their words, particularly sensitive, to use in alternative contexts and, holding permanent possession of their stories, stripped them of control. They were prepared to co-operate with the system, but their answers to questions were dry and superficial. When the audio taping was dispensed with, they relaxed, their trust in me was enhanced, and the atmosphere was noticeably enriched with more significant conversations.

#### 12.4.3 My Presence

Although not an intrinsic participant observer, despite attempts to keep my two roles as separate as possible, it would have been disingenuous to ignore my insider privileged knowledge and others' acknowledgement of my position within the university. This had the advantages of allowing some of Denzin's "triangulation" approach (1978, Chapter 8) to offer balance and context to the statements participants made. It also gave me privileged access to members of staff at a senior level. My employment position did pose the risk that students could have been reluctant to criticise the institution. However awareness of that risk went some way to mitigating it and, despite my insistence to the participants that I was acting in a student capacity, they associated my daytime position with an assumption that I was somehow "safe" with personal, sensitive details. Likewise, members of staff spoke their minds with the belief that their position was legitimate and that I would use the information responsibly. I was aware of, and to some extent humbled by, the trust they were prepared to place in me.

I would defend the decision to take a deep view of the lives of a small number of people. However, the danger of this approach could have been the urge to generalise from the findings. It would be ridiculous to view my study as representative of all institutions and all Mature students. It does give a snapshot, however, and indicates future areas worthy of focus.

#### 12.4.4 Summary of Methodological Contributions:

- I have detailed the subjective journey of someone initially attracted to one methodological approach, confronted with the finding that it could neither accommodate nor answer the questions posed, first exploring and then adopting another.
- The appropriateness of the approach is entirely dependent on the research questions. The combination of the two, qualitative and quantitative, may offer thoroughness, but both are valid in their own way.

- Adding to the literature finding the use of journal advantageous in terms of timing and documenting variances in development and mood as they happen (Chapter 8), some participants found the method a “self-counselling” tool (12.4.1).
- The control of the environment of interview was given over entirely to the participants and this enriched the data (12.4.2).

Finally, as the Government tries to force a modern political agenda across institutions, even with traditional organisational cultures, this thesis offers contributions to the ensuing political debate.

## **12.5 Political Debate**

The findings from this study add to several of the theoretical areas of debate highlighted in Chapter 1, for example, No.1 surrounding “*Understanding Organisations*”, and No. 4, “*The Successful Student Experience*”, especially focusing on the “*Expectations and Motivations*”. It ultimately questions the integrity of a political agenda seeking to introduce diverse students to universities uniformly without preparation of either party or the firm monitoring of the effect on them. The Crisis Theorists of the 1990s believed university core beliefs in educational elitism were under threat. My research attracted a similar response from the academic staff almost 20 years later. However, in addition my study shows that the Mature students on the receiving end of this Government agenda, viewed it as inappropriately targeted and were defensive of the academic elitism, even if its delivery format in an Ancient context necessarily gave them a complex journey.

### **12.5.1 Specialist Institutions**

Although the participants preferred a diverse university rather than a tightly specialised one, they sought institutional transparency to self-declare strengths and weaknesses with respect to the particular needs of certain student applicant groups. Ancients were seen as the least appropriate for the introduction of Mature students,

not least because of their lack of direct link to knowledge application. The participants defended the Ancient's function to provide liberal arts and science education, and to actively avoid any movement into the world of training. Universities, but, in particular, Ancients, were seen to provide a forum for multi-disciplinary approaches to thinking about complex issues in life. To have a vocational purpose only for one institution was thought by many of the participants to be an ideological loss for universities. However, this is a viewpoint only expressed after some time in the institution, and one increasing throughout the study course. My interpretation sees an ideological position taken by Mature students further indicating the potential for a higher level of contribution to be made by Mature students to University life than can be made by mainstreamed students at their more naïve time of life.

#### 12.5.2 Opportunities for Employability

Highlighted as one of the most significant findings of this study, (discussed in Chapter 11), the student participants, prior to and entering the institution, in some way equated a degree with the securing of employment. When recounted to Academics, they found this acutely surprising. By linking a university education with increased graduate income, staff accused the political propaganda and media reports of ignoring recent evidence (Naylor *et al*, 2002; Purcell *et al*, 2007; Schofield, 2005) which highlighted, particularly for Mature graduates, the decrease of opportunities for financial reward. At best, both staff and students believed the Government agenda to be opaque and, at worst, actively misleading prospective students by omitting the full information which would aid making better, more appropriate, personal choices about entering university.

Staff and students both believed that a university degree may affect “employability” by increasing confidence, opening minds, teaching how to think critically, organise and address life. Once again, the distinction between vocationalism and employability became critical to emphasise. In developing employability, I would link this into my proposed definition of purpose for an Ancient, that of *developing*

*agency*. I suggest, however, that my study really highlights this aspect of the Purpose debate offering an opportunity for emphasis of what may seem obvious to staff but clearly is not to the prospective students.

The commitment of students to the university purpose which was not directly vocational, and thus shared with the ideological intellectual stimulation view of the staff, seemed to develop slowly as they progressed through their university career. I would suggest that this is a cultural influence which operates once inside the door but is not evident to students prior to entry. Staff defended the agency of the students to apply their knowledge in whatever way they chose. To the student, this agency was experienced as anything from freedom to unstructured anxiety, especially as the end of the study period grew near and the pressure opened up to apply their new knowledge. While considering this concept of agency, adding to the “*Studying People*” debate in Chapter 1 examining “*Control of the Experience*” it is worth remembering that the data found Mature students seldom exercising their agency while in the University. However, the academic freedom culture, (linking into other highlighted areas of debate on “*Studying Universities*” and examination of the “*Institutional Values*” in particular) necessitated the overall maintenance of an emphasis on freedom of expression for the students. University was seen as an “opportunity” but the student had to learn to exercise their agency in order to appreciate it. Once again, if one were to identify a core purpose of an Ancient as aiming to develop agency, it would seem helpful for the students to understand the expectation of them to seize these opportunities, rather than lose them.

### 12.5.3 Indiscriminate Marketing and Financial Implications

My findings would suggest that the Government’s momentum to pressurise traditional and non-traditional students to enter HE be at least balanced with financial advising about the risk of doing so and for that advice to be transparent, publicly available, and even systematically embedded in the admission process. Institutional idiosyncrasies should also be included in the specification of calculated gains possible. Clearly such an approach is contrary to both the marketing

strategies of institutions competing for a shared customer base and to the government push for a more generally educated society. However the personal financial hardship being currently encouraged without attention was thought unjustifiable in my data. The responsibility for this task has to be assigned and owned. I would suggest that the apparent transparent honesty of such an approach, combined with a focus on the advantages of the journey, rather than the degree attainment alone, could be a distinctive marketing point for the University.

On reflection of the Ancient's role within the sphere of lifelong learning in Scotland, I would agree with the views of the Governor participants that the expansion of universities, especially since 1992, has been one catalyst for the development of a particularly elitist culture in the Ancients in an effort to retain their uniqueness. I would suggest that the disregard shown by the Government and the Funding Councils towards the individual geographical accessibility and physical estate of each Scottish HE institution has resulted in a greater inequality of standards and recruitment/access opportunities between the institutions. The participants in my study already had a cognitive image of a hierarchy of Scottish universities, paying attention to league tables and to the published entrance requirements of each institution and to their marketing "pitches". They accepted that the universities in Scotland are different from each other but did not see the difference as celebrated nor individual strengths highlighted.

Entering into the "*Organisational Change*" debate of Chapter 1, the focus on mainstreamed students is justified by geographical location and residential context. However I recognise, with some discomfort, that this could be a convenient excuse needed to maintain homogeneity and bar the possible stretch towards any form of diversity, while paying "lip-service" to the Governments' wider access agenda. However, I would contend that radical identity changes are not necessarily required. Ultimately, in implementation of the equality legislation, the judgement rests on the interpretation of the phrase "reasonable adjustments". My own view is that it is imperative that opening an institution's doors to diversity must be undertaken once

an inventory of organisational essential strengths is taken and reinforced in order to avoid sacrifice of beneficial aspects of the current organisation. In the next 10 years of this fluctuating environment of universities coming under pressure to be “all things to all men” the trick will be for managers, with an open and inclusive mind, to compile that inventory, justify the necessity for each item on it, and protect the core of an organisation’s identity while stretching the institution to diversity with the aim of avoiding stagnancy and enriching breadth of function, wherever possible.

#### 12.5.4 The Legitimacy of Locus for “Late-Life” Learning

Finally, a controversial discussion surrounded the L-LS participants who were identified in many ways as studying in a parallel channel. The Ancient in this study maintained “a youth culture” as core to its identity. Some staff and other Mature students raised concerns about their draining of mainstream funding and resources which could equip a younger person more likely to pay back society through subsequent employment. However, they would also “fit” the culture better and it is important to remember the cautions in the literature (for example, Bamber & Tett, 1999) that this may be a justification of the structures in order to minimise individual agency and it is the balance of legitimacy of maintaining identity in the face of accusations of inflexibility and exclusion that faces the Ancient currently.

The discussion with participants (staff and students) led to a complex debate. In spite of Academics welcoming the richness the L-LS participants offered in the classroom, their addition was suggested as a luxury which society could not afford in this format. Extending this to look at whether all Mature students would benefit from mainstreamed or specialised HE provision (for example in an Access environment), when the actual vote had to be cast, there was a surprising level of consensus. While encouragement of occasional specialist streams and balanced, “reasonable” allowances was appreciated, the application of a policy of narrow “specialism” was rejected by all. Nevertheless, maintaining institutional identity, the staff did not think that they should try to emulate a mini “Open” university, given the ratios of Mature to mainstream students willing to attend such a

geographically isolated institution and there was no apology for focusing on mainstreamed, residential students. The key to this whole debate would seem to lie in the term “Balance”.

#### 12.5.5 Summary of Contributions to the Political Debate

- 20 years after the literature of the crisis theorists, the staff in this Ancient still believes that academic standards are under threat.
- The Government should take localised features and institutional identity into account when auditing for wider access and diversity (12.5.1).
- All staff and students rejected the “Gold Standard”, some seeing it as a neutralising of institutional identity. They called for a recognised diverse HE sector, highlighting and supporting the individual strengths of each institution (12.5.1)
- Staff wanted to be disassociated from collusion with a Government drive to tempt Mature students to engage on promise of employment at the end, but resulting in large numbers of graduates carrying unreasonable debt. (12.5.2)
- The YMS view university as the expected default from secondary education. Rather than being viewed as an exception or elite part of Scottish society, this age group has come to view University as the norm (12.5.2).
- Recent literature indicates the financial payback on investment for Mature students is tenuous so participants would have welcomed some Government or independent organisation guideline to specifying what calculated gains are on offer according to institution type (12.5.3).
- Staff strongly defended the institutional identity as necessarily focused on mainstreamed and residential students with a core of liberal arts, pure science education of an elite standard. They made no apology for this. They encouraged the marketing of the institution on the advantages of the learning journey as well as the degree attainment. However they also placed a “youth culture” at the centre of the institutional identity (12.5.3).
- University managers will be challenged in the next 10 years to protect institutional identity while stretching to diversity wherever possible (12.5.3).

- Some concerns were expressed about a mainstreamed university being the most appropriate locus for Late-Life Mature students. There was also surprise at the financial support available to this group. The concerns face accusations of being disingenuous excuses to chose a youth culture over diversity (12.5.4).
- Participants were open to streamlining within institutions in a broad context, but against narrow, specialised institutions (12.5.4).

Given that there have been considerable viewpoints gathered, patterns of consensus spotted and findings highlighted, there are, nevertheless, clear limitations to this study.

## **12.6 Limitations**

In terms of scope, this study is limited in subject-type, in locus and in sheer numbers.

In subject selection, the study examines only Mature students, while nevertheless indicating some pointers for other non-traditional students. The findings relating to the influence of introduction of diversity would be interesting to test on these other groups. Additionally, the Mature students who had withdrawn from the institution would have contributed a useful perspective. It is with regret that they could not be persuaded to take part in the project.

The locus of the study is within an institution which is quite distinct. In some ways it is an extreme example of the traditional style of university located originally at the hub of medieval activity, but what can be described in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as a remote part of the country. Even in terms of other Ancients, in other countries in the UK, and certainly in terms of Modern or Post-1992 institutions, although this study presents pointers worthy of further exposure, the generalisability of the data throughout other styles of institutions delivering HE is not appropriate. A caution to benchmarking with other Ancients or universities of another format would

highlight that studies of that type would answer different research questions. Finding comparable formats of universities with comparable experiences (allowing for geographical context, population size, etc.) would be difficult within the UK HE sector, and impossible within Scotland. However comparisons could be made if, for example, it was possible to devise a study of sub-classifications focusing on particular aspects of universities. Examples would include discipline-specific studies or, perhaps, examination of experiences of students at the recruitment stage prior to entry.

In numbers terms, this is a small-scale study due, in part, to the limited number of Mature students at this institution. A larger scale study would assess the robustness of the findings and if it were expanded to produce in depth comparisons with mainstreamed students clearer internal benchmarking would have been available. However, one justification for the levels of Mature students at this institution (although excused through low applications due to geographical location) fits very well with management policy in that by keeping the percentage manageable the overall core mission of the institution is neither distorted nor inhibited. Nevertheless, I would argue that the richness and breadth of data harvested in this study gives enough information to highlight areas worth further investigation, possibly in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Given the potential researcher/manager ambiguity, it would be difficult for this study to be replicated by another researcher following in these footsteps. This is a clear limitation, and yet, offers a richness of insight which is quite different.

In terms of timing, this study only took a snapshot in the lives of these students, albeit a four-month long one. However, the long term consequences, the loss and gains on reflection after 10 or 20 years would give more interesting information and offer a “*life*” audit which indeed takes a longer life perspective.

Perhaps the greatest methodological limitation of this study has been the length of time it took to complete, bringing complications on a regular basis. The landscape of the study area could be described as “fluid”; factors have been subject to external influences changing the study focus from time to time. Examples include collection of institutional statistics by the University Registry changing classifications, while the Government classification of the student participants changed from “mature” to “independent” in 2006. Another consistent complication of the prolonged research period was the temptation to take off at tangents and investigate. However, necessary focus, bounded by time, word limit and my study aims, brought back to the specific.

However the study has resembled a “Russian Doll”; in opening up the area for exploration, many more areas have been revealed, tempting to be explored.

### **12.7 Future Research Suggestions**

Further to this, there are future directions that would urge further exploration. Expanding the study into areas as above, introducing comparisons with other subjects, (traditional and non-traditional) and other loci would be an obvious route to follow. Of particular interest amongst the non-traditional students, were the Late life Mature students. Although a controversial area of debate, the question of encouraging post-retirement applicants into mainstreamed university offers many areas for further research. One aspect which may help to give context to the speculation in this area would be the review of the financial packages offered to the Late-lifers while gathering some evidence of the health benefits and costs to the Government of such an action.

As well as comparing with other diverse students, queries demanding comparisons with mainstreamed students are raised throughout this work. One example might be the identification of “Escape” as a motivation for the student participants, the emphasis on the importance of league tables, the change to “self”, the development of a value of intellectualism and, although it appears that Mature students withdraw

more than others, more importantly, do they *consider* leaving more often than mainstreamed students?

The use of journals as a method was advantageous, allowing each student participant to dictate the interview context, encouraging richer data, and enabling a comparison between qualitative and quantitative approaches. In addition, although self-awareness did limit the conflict between the two roles of researcher and institutional administrator from my perspective, further investigation of this role ambiguity from the participants' perspective may assist in future research design.

Various suggestions have been made for practical changes to operations for the Mature student context (Chapter 10 and Appendix 13). For example, strong recommendations have been made to hold a pre-arrival interview with Mature students in an attempt to understand and manage their expectations. Additionally, direct communication between the university and the families of Mature students has been suggested as assistance to harmonise the two environments. Further research should explore the effects of these, and other targeted initiatives, if they are introduced.

Having drawn together the threads of data findings and produced them in a format of contributions to theory, practice, methodology and policy debate, I now offer another set of lenses through which to view the "Mature student". Each lens displays a narrative of how a particular group of Mature students are motivated, integrated, what affects their daily lives, what they believe in, and what cultures frame their daily existence. None of these narratives describe any particular participant in my study, but are rather a combination of those in each category.

## **Chapter 13**

### **The Social Construction of the Mature Student:**

#### **Seven Summary Narratives**

##### **13.1 Introduction**

Seven narratives are now constructed. It is worth reiterating that these are fictional illustrations, created from a combination of reviewed, and analysed, data. Six summarise the data from one of the staff or student participant categories. However similarities of perception between all the actors emerged in more than one narrative, demonstrating a core of common characteristics, values and beliefs justifying the classification of “Mature students” as an identifiable group. These are represented in the seventh, and final, narrative. To assume that these common themes will necessarily result in a physical or mental gravitation towards each other would be an assumption too far (Blaxter, 1993; Waller, 2006). Nevertheless, as participants’ shared understandings emerged from the data, the seventh lens summarises the areas where a harmonising of expectations could lead to minimal conflict between the actors. Finally, later in the chapter, offering a framework for the findings, I make one final visit to the structure from previous chapters: Purpose, Bonding and Reflection.

##### **13.2 The Young Mature Student (YMS)**

Aged over 21 years at first registration for an undergraduate degree, the students included in this category were up to, and including, 30 years old. All originally anticipated that they would go to university after school, but, somehow, “lost their way”. At the end of mainstreamed secondary education something happened to divert them; they became ill, had an opportunity to travel, fell in love, or their secondary examination results were less than expected and they drifted. University, the original plan, was put “on hold”.

After some years working in labouring jobs or, often in the hospitality industry, the students became dissatisfied. They defined themselves in relation to others around

them, in terms of dress, habits, beliefs and intellectual capability which affected discourses and found a mismatch. They did not find their interaction with their colleagues intellectually stimulating, and they felt that their current jobs were something anyone could do, thus, by definition, it failed to make them feel special. They wanted to define themselves using a set of core beliefs and values which were shared with other actors and, given that education was, for each of them, a guiding ethos of value, once again, they had hope that HE would contain people who shared this. Although not selfless, a unique feature of this age group, was the seeking of a job which might also give them the chance to “make the world better” in a philanthropic sense. (This sense of “ideology” as a motive is a new contribution to the research literature in this area.) Additional definitions of a “better” job included one which would be more interesting, more challenging and offering travel, and, to some extent, looking towards others in the world.

The YMS participants in my study were committed to the belief that a university education was not only necessary in order to access such jobs, but that the better job would follow, virtually automatically, from degree completion. They believed this for two reasons:

- They saw that the professional people in society filling jobs carrying higher societal status all had university degrees.
- They encountered people who became educational mentors and who legitimised and reinforced this role of universities as a conduit for life betterment with a contiguous element of enhancing the lives of others. These included Further Education College teachers, parents, and friends.

In terms of timing, their personal circumstances had changed to the point where they felt they were now ready to follow through on the original plan; babies were going to school or some money had been saved from work to contribute towards the financial investment. Guilt and obligation also played a large motivational role in their return to university. Self-fulfilment was a core belief they did not consciously acknowledge but each admitted to having a deep rooted ambition to be the best they

could be. This was then reinforced by others (parents, friends, extended family, teachers, and employers) and when their intellectual capacity was occasionally demonstrated, they were reminded that university was within their capability. They responded to the guilt by eventually fulfilling others' expectations and entering university.

When choosing institutions, the YMS participants were acutely aware of published league tables, able to recount the names of what they saw as publicly acknowledged "top" universities in the UK. They associated a degree from one of these universities with recognition of worth by employers. They also considered the networking opportunities at these institutions to be significant and subscribed to an "*it's who you know*" philosophy of social mobility.

Many of the YMS participants entered through specialised access programmes. Unlike mainstreamed students' "academic decompression chamber" experience described by Simons and Parlett (1976), these students found the adjustment time offered by specialised programmes helpful in starting up their academic engines and creating study routines in their lives. It also offered them opportunities for social integration with others from similar backgrounds, with similar targets and core beliefs, which, unlike the other categories, was vital for these students (referring back to their motivation of social networking).

The sense of belonging ended on entry to the main course of study. YMS participants entered with the self-perception they were young, but had quickly to recast themselves as old. The university offer was interpreted as acceptance to the "In-Group" of mainstreamed students, sharing a background and core beliefs with like-minded learners, but instead they found themselves positioned on the periphery. The application of the label "Mature" was a component of their identification as the "Out-Group" in an arena where the defining primary criteria for membership was age. Their sense of isolation was evident as they described their eagerness to get involved with mainstreamed social and extra curricular activities.

They described the slow dawning shock that their chronological age marked them for discrimination when they had expected the act of studying to be the communal activity uniting all the actors in a single definition. Academic staff discourses were aimed at school-leavers; Orientation Welcome Talks, and the establishment of institutional rules, all designed with an assumption of irresponsible teenagers who had still to be guided in the rights and wrongs of independent living, combined to reinforce that Mature students were not the norm.

Perhaps of particular interest, some in this group were international students who, had they been entering a university in their home country, would have been at a parallel, and mainstreamed, age with their contemporaries. They had not factored in the early starting age in Scotland. Thus, their position in the “Out-Group” was even more shocking to them. Beliefs that they were slower in reaching the admission criteria than their counterparts in Britain began to emerge:

*“I kept thinking - why am I so old? How come they come to this university so early? Am I stupid? What did I do wrong?” (Katerina)*

This cognitive leap equated “Mature” with “slow” and “backward”; there was an expected shared speed of learning and milestones of achievement, and a lack of conscious acknowledgement that these were culturally influenced.

As the course progressed, these students, without exception, took up employment on a part-time and, for some, full-time basis at the same time as their studies. They found their employers to be unsympathetic, but admitted that they understood that their university involvement would not benefit their employers in any way. If residing in the university, the differences in the core beliefs of mainstreamed students again emphasised the YMS participants’ position on the periphery. They did not identify with the mainstreamed alcohol culture, the mainstreamed discourses were not shared and they found the rationalised myths (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), for example the wearing of academic gowns, sometimes confusing and often

questionable. Many reverted to commuting from home where their own behavioural norms were accepted and where they were not constantly reminded, i.e. in *all* aspects of their lives, of their age as a defining factor.

The YMS participants were most critical of the mainstreamed students, rejecting their behavioural norms. They felt others, mainstreamed students and staff alike, disrespected or even disregarded the life experience of the YMS which, given the intense personal development experienced in late adolescent, was proportionately deemed more than the chronological years.

In spite of this, the YMS participants were determined to aim high academically, recognising the focus they now possessed which had emerged with maturity from adolescence and allowed them to engage with HE in a way that they would not have been able to do as a school-leaver. A significant percentage of the YMS participants, once entered into the institution, changed their original target of an undergraduate degree and extended it to postgraduate studies. The YMS participants expressed an understanding that, until this research point, they had not recognised their maturity and yet they have understood that they were better equipped to engage with academia. This was an unexpected outcome of the research process.

Considering themselves to be older and therefore more independent than the mainstreamed students, the student participants were embarrassed to show their vulnerabilities and seldom asked for help. They had come searching for an opportunity to fulfil themselves by developing and exercising their intellectual capability with their peers in an environment sympathetic to their core beliefs. They had not found that. The educational experience had been helpful, but they felt they had not belonged. Arriving with expectations of being equal, amidst attractive, confident, mainstreamed students, they felt rejected. In the eyes of the mainstreamed students they self-reflected as old, unattractive and slow. The age gap, small in actuality, was perceived and experienced as a vast gulf.

### The Summary of the YMS

The YMS participants had lost their way, post-school, but adhered to an ethos of education which prompted guilt for not having fulfilled their personal and family expectations to go on to university. They felt useless and, wanting to find a special role for themselves in the context and lives of others, they followed an “ideology” and identified university as a conduit. Future employment, earning graduate status earnings, was strongly expected, but the institutional choice of what they saw as a “prestigious” and “elite” university additionally considered a networking advantage for employment contacts on graduation. They arrived expecting to be students, equal with others. They lived in student residences but found the defining criteria for membership of the “In-Group” to be age, so many felt old, unattractive and peripheral. The YMS group was the most disenchanted of my three student participant groups. Their surprise at finding a mismatch between their identity and that of the mainstreamed students placed them as the most vulnerable group.

### **13.3 The Mid-Life Mature Student (M-LS)**

Three major characteristics marked the Mid-Life students, members of this category aged between 31 and 50 years.

Firstly, this group were characterised by their pragmatism. Decisions were necessarily made within the context of their responsibilities; spouses, dependents, carer roles, domestic burdens. Most encountered financial strain. This group had a majority of female participants (2:1 ratio), and they all commuted which, given the isolated geographical location of the University, complicated things further.

Secondly, life change characterised their motivation. M-LS participants sought to use university as a tool for taking a different direction when faced with a major life change. The Mid-lifers in the study group had experienced one, or a combination of, illness and disability (2), redundancy (2), divorce (1), marriage and pregnancy (2), or enforced national relocation (1).

Thirdly, they struggled to define their identity through the change process, with indications of how they did not want to be defined, rather than how they did. They all considered that a university degree would give them a better job, but, given their pragmatism, this time the adjective equated quite simply with more money and a better standard of living for them and their families.

Not one of them doubted for a minute that a degree from an “elite” university would give them a direct financial return on their investment. Like the YMS participant, the M-LS participants based their belief in the direct link to better finance having identified a degree as the key shared characteristic of the affluent professionals currently in society. However they held a historic vision rather than recent experience of graduate employment where increasing evidence indicates some graduates do not have a high earning professional position.

M-LS participants were captured initially by the recruitment publicity of the university but, critically, they subsequently identified with a particular representative of the university who convinced them that they were appropriate candidates. This was critical in terms of the M-LS identity. It was important for a member of the university, perceived as carrying authority, to legitimise their self-assessment that the university was a place where they could belong.

In one other aspect, a shared experience was identified between M-LS and YMS participants: in terms of self-reflection, this group, being female dominated, shared the expressed doubts in their attractiveness voiced by the females in the YMS category. They described themselves as being more self-conscious regarding their looks since arrival at the institution and having felt an acute drop in their self-confidence. Some described major changes which they had made in their self-presentation, in terms of clothes, hair style etc.; these were then noticed by their family at home and resented as a sign that the student was adhering more to the norms of the new world in which they found themselves and rejecting the old.

At that point, the similarities end. The M-LS rejected social integration with both the YMS participants and mainstreamed students, both of whom were seen as adhering to their individually different set of beliefs and engaging in different discourses. If any social or informal integration was admitted to, the M-LS participants undertook it with junior staff members and postgraduate students, closer in age to themselves and sharing similar life experiences. They maintained their home base for the purpose of socialising and treated the university as a “*day job*”. Within the university environment they needed academic integration only, positioning themselves as peripheral (unlike the Young group who were positioned there by others). However they were happy to initiate contact through formal rather than informal means, joining in the Access Summer School, the Part-time evening degree programme or the Mature Student Society and, in all cases, bonding with other M-LS participants for the clear purpose of academic facilitation. (All three of these “bonding” groups were inaccessible or unwelcoming to the YMS participants). These groups offered a shared value base at the point of entry which allowed the participants to develop their view that the institution was offering similar values to themselves and being mutually reinforced (as with the “Fit” studies of Chatman [1989] and Schneider [1987]), and therefore encouraging commitment by them to persevere with the programme.

The M-LS lived in two worlds of home and university while studying, and, as such, carried part of each identity into the other social arena. The discourses at home could change as a result of university influences, in some cases creating new discourses with family members who had themselves attended university, or with teenage dependents who were undertaking secondary level examinations. However there was also a considerable clash in discourses with friends and family who had no or limited experience of education. Like the YMS participants, guilt was a common emotion for family and partners when study time distracted attention from other responsibilities. In particular, those with dependents relied heavily on family and friends to help with childcare responsibilities but worried about the impact that their reduced attention might have on their children. Their justification for such

sacrifices, both in parental attention and finances, was that they would be repaid in full when the family lifestyle improved as a direct result of the student gaining a degree and consequently raising the family income.

A final complication for those living at home and with family responsibilities was the rural surroundings which brought commuting complications including poor public transport; unreliable private cars (due to lack of funds), and difficult weather conditions during the winter. However, the institutional choice was straightforward for this group; their commitments limited their geographic mobility.

In the spirit of pragmatism, again, the M-LS looked for the institution to give practical support in life organisation, for example, in offering flexible systems for library collections and occasionally providing overnight accommodation for late classes. They also wanted transparency prior to arrival; they needed a realistic idea of what life was like for a commuter entering a university which, once in, (they now knew) was clearly residentially based. However, estimating their agency as very limited, they felt honoured to be accepted by what they called a “prestigious university”, always aware of the other applicants who had been unsuccessful, and they did not feel agency to criticise the structure of the institution even when they found it restrictive.

Academically, M-LS participants did not adhere to the recommendation in the literature for small group teaching (Kember, 1995; 2001), at least not when it meant sharing the experience with mainstreamed students who did not follow the same norms for teamwork. They found working in small groups with mainstreamed students a frustrating experience and regularly were left, feeling responsible for group performance, to carry a greater responsibility for the group assessments than the younger students.

### Summary of the M-LS

Forced into a life change (by redundancy, divorce, pregnancy, ill health), these students sought to establish a new identity. Publicity or encouragement by a “mentor” convinced them of the university’s role as a tool to achieve this. They had no doubt that university would lead them to a new financial status following graduation: they did not consider that, at the end of the day, they could be disadvantaged long term financially but saw this as a sound financial investment for the future of their families. Predominantly female and juggling life demands of family commitments, they did not reside in the university, but lived “locally”, pragmatically choosing the university for its ability to fit in with home life. They oscillated between their two separate identities on a daily basis but retained their social identity at home, having no wish to socialise at university except where there was an academic focus. This was one group for whom the small group teaching format was frustrating, partly because of the intolerance of the mainstreamed students’ lack of group skills. They found the two sets of burdens challenging to manage, but, if they remained after the first semester, the chances of withdrawing decreased thereafter, and, if retained, they aimed high academically. They took great pride in the example of education which they set for their children.

### **13.4 The Late-Life Mature Student (L-LS)**

Mature students, aged 51 years and over, had motivational influences which acted as triggers for the sequence of understandings thereafter. Crucially reminiscent of Archer (2003) and Reay (2002) and, as found by Sennett (2006), L-LS participants became dissatisfied with a life which felt “*empty*” and they needed to feel useful. They had time to spare; they were unfulfilled, looking for more from their life. The outcome of a degree was of secondary importance to the process of learning and mental stimulation. They had a desire to keep active and a thirst for learning to match it (recognised by O’Dowd, 2006) and, as part of the process, they wanted to meet new people and avoid poor relationships at home.

In many respects L-LS participants were the true exponents of the ethos of Lifelong Learning. Characterised by their enquiring mind and their motivation was less of a following of a mentor, chasing after something as seen in the other two groups. However, their studies tended also to provide an “escape” route from their home environment or from personal emptiness. Their financial investment was negligible, given government financing, and since, initially, the degree was not a huge consideration, it was neither a wholehearted, nor a long term commitment.

Nevertheless, seeking intellectual stimulation, the L-LS participants found, to their surprise, that their individual difference was welcomed by the mainstream students and they were encouraged, as a novelty or eccentric, to join in their activities. The L-LS participants spoke with warmth of their young mainstreamed friends; ironically, those with the largest age gap, were the easiest to integrate. They carried no pre-existing expectations of integration, but their obvious interest in others and life experience gained the respect of those in the mainstream. They had no criticism of their young friends and found their lives consistently interesting and regularly amusing. They enjoyed small group teaching and were entirely comfortable in a relationship with mainstreamed students where neither party found the other threatening. In self-development terms, the L-LS participants sought the company of youth. Rather than slowing down in their lives, they wanted to feel young and take opportunities that they had not been able to when younger. They had the confidence which comes with age to question everything and lacked self-consciousness. Life was an adventure; everything they came across was an unexpected bonus.

The relationship with staff was less successful with L-LS participants, leading to some of them speculation that academic staff may have found Late-life students threatening (although this was usually reserved for the younger academics). Viewing themselves as a slice of social history, the L-LS participants felt the occasional lack of acknowledgement of, or disrespect for, their life experience. Curiously, this was more from academic staff whom they accused of being

inconsiderate of their needs, leading to unfortunate confusions which could easily have been avoided and this they found frustrating. They would travel miles on buses to turn up to lectures which had been cancelled. The note on the door indicated to them that the academic had little interest in those who were peripheral, aiming their system of cancellation on the mainstreamed students.

Although thirsting for more knowledge, some L-LS participants, like the other two groups and staff, were unsure if university was the correct place for this to be offered. At times they felt guilt at taking up a younger person's place and were "*amazed*" at the financial Government allowances they were given to study. They could not justify this expenditure on them, given their inability to pay anything back to society in tax form. Others who shared this view thought that a university was a locus for students under 50 years, but thought that post-retirement students should have their interest in education as a hobby catered for in another environment. It is of note that the YMS participants, in particular, felt uncomfortable about this suggestion considering it an expression of an age bias of which they, themselves, could be victims. However, pragmatically, they saw limited university places and, if not a direct link to guaranteed employment, then certainly the offer of a contribution towards employability and, in their view, this seemed wasted on post-retirement people. However, taking themselves out of that debate, the Late-life students did feel that the course of study had enriched their lives and had even helped their health by providing an interest.

When facing problems, all student participants found the University staff understanding. There was, however, one clear problem particularly experienced by L-LS participants in difficult relationships experienced at home. A deterioration of their relationship with their spouse or partner was attributed to their decision to join the university. Reflecting a societal link between university and employment, the partners saw the students' study as a selfish hobby. The luxury of expanding minds and not using university for financial reward, perhaps stronger in the lower socio-economic classes, resulted in these partners being unsupportive. Their partners had

seen retirement as a time for attention for each other, and jealousy emerged of the time the study stole. The students knew that the university study had widened their minds, opened up the network of people with whom they could now interact. They had been trained to challenge everything with their newly acquired critical minds. Some would admit to having become “*annoying to live with*” and using unfamiliar discourses. The relationship between them and their partners would seem to be a complicated one, with the development of the students’ “self” putting pressure on their partners to change and develop their “self” to keep up with them in order to maintain the closeness of the relationship. Of course, a question lurks asking whether these problems may have lain there, quietly in the background, waiting to be triggered off by something like a university study course.

#### Summary of the L-LS

These students came seeking an interest and a hobby believing this would provide health benefits and an enhanced quality of life, post-retirement. They did not expect to integrate with the mainstreamed students, but they were surprised to find themselves accepted for their distinctiveness and eccentric status. Unlike the other Mature student groups in this study, tensions existed between Late-life students and Academics, for, on occasion, their life experience clashed with the academic referencing, or their particular needs (for example, transport) remained unaccounted for by staff. Other tensions were also created. At home, the Late-life students had difficult relationships with their partners who had little tolerance for the students’ commitment to a relationship or relationships other than theirs, *i.e.*, their study, new friends, adoption of different discourses. The other Mature students, the staff and even the Late-lifers themselves identified a critical tension; although participation in education at this late life stage offered a vital opportunity, university was not thought by any of these groups to be the natural place to provide it, and an Ancient, residential university even less so.

### 13.5 Academics' Construction of the Mature Student

Academics considered research to be the principle Ancient purpose. However, they recognised teaching as a necessary by-product and, in doing so, they enjoyed Mature student participation, describing them as:

*“a pleasure to have in the class” (Academic B).*

The Academic expected Mature students to raise morale in the tutorial; they saw them as having a different perspective on self-discipline, learning and the values in life. Educationally, they perceived Mature students to be much more committed than their younger peers, reading “around” the subject rather than “*working the system*” by offering a bare minimum of input. They spoke up on behalf of the mainstreamed students, they initiated debates to enable the mainstreamed’ participation, saving the Academic from doing all the work in tutorials and helping to act as an intermediary for the class, acting as a tester for the Academic who was able to get feedback on whether or not the class understood his/her lead. They got academic debate going, which most Academics found refreshingly stimulating.

The challenge of including Mature students in a tight learning community, however, could sometimes balance out the benefits. In an environment where the Academic can usually feel wise, powerful in an environment where educational hierarchy recognises wisdom, the presence of a Mature student in their class could indeed be threatening, especially where life experiences could give a volume of general knowledge. Such a challenge could place the Academic outside of their comfort zone. Academics did admit that some Mature students, in their experience, had been “*awkward and troublesome*” (more so than mainstreamed students) but this was more commonly reported by particularly young teaching staff who felt their authority challenged or were less experienced in managing the class and allowing opportunities for fair expression by all.

Assessing their prominent characteristics, some Academics had assumed that the Mature student would, necessarily, have a lot more confidence than the

mainstreamed students, but this tended not to be the case. The threat of student diversity on academic standards, although expressed as a fear for wider access students, always had Mature students exempted in the data (Lumb and Vail, 2004). Academics viewed Mature students as having a stoic integrity, asking for few favours and needing, for self-esteem, to avoid any interpretation of them being seen to abuse a system. A potential clash lay with the Academics' wish to adhere to strict time limits for course and module completion, proving problematic if health concerns of L-LS participants and family responsibilities of the M-LS participants slowed the study process down. Individual flexible learning programmes would be helpful but the Academics were more prepared to do this for Mature students than for other classifications of diverse students, a clear indication of the respect in which they hold them, or at least in acknowledgement of their diverse responsibilities and needs.

Academics thought that streamed specialisms assisted in meeting particular needs. With this in mind, they supported the Evening Degree programme and the Access Summer School, but nevertheless acknowledged the advantages to having Mature students in the core of the mainstreamed university activity. In some respects Mature students fulfilled the scholarship philosophy of Academics, but that focus engendered the accusation of naivety; they felt uncomfortable that these students were investing financially and personally when they would be very unlikely to get a full return on that investment. It may be reasonable to assume that someone would have warned them of this. However, one wonders who would have done this? The Government who has a focus of the collective, societal good? The institution which is competing with other universities for a single market of students? Neither would seem likely, although the university with the least difficulty in attracting applications from students would seem to be in the better position to do this.

#### Summary of the Academic Construction of the Mature student

Academics, highlighting the primary purpose of Ancient institutions as research, acknowledged teaching as a necessary by-product. The Academics found the

interaction with YMS and M-LS participants intellectually stimulating and enjoyed academic debate with them. They used them as intermediaries with, and spokespersons for, the mainstreamed students. They could, however, find the Late-life students challenging and, as alternative teaching and assessment needs were required, they recognised a need for specialised streaming. Equating strict timetables with a challenging academic standard, Academics were reluctant to accommodate flexible deadlines, a decision which sometimes clashed with the external family responsibilities of Mature students. They did, however, find M-LS participants stoic in their determination to perform according to mainstream deadlines and therefore, although a possible theoretical tension, in practice this was seldom a problem. The Academics were not consciously aware of the strength of the link created by Mature students between a degree and financially rewarding employment. They strongly supported greater candour in the publicising of the student experience prior to admission in an attempt to manage expectations. They were unclear as to where the remit for this lay.

### **13.6 The Management Construction of the Mature Student**

For Managers, universities should be focusing on teaching and research. Although acknowledging a certain amount of accountability, they had particular misgivings about the Government implementation towards uniformly diverse HE institutions throughout the UK, displaying disregard for the individual character and culture of each institution. For example, respect was shown for individual strengths in some colleges but there was concern that expansion of the curriculum with the focus on university status had diluted courses previously offered at a high standard but within the classification of Further Education. Sharing much of the Governors' opinions, the Managers felt it disingenuous to "*pretend*" that a degree from one university in one subject was comparable to others with different entry requirements or monitoring targets throughout.

The Managers helpfully differentiated "Remit" from "Purpose" assuming the former contained a definition of measure, extent or limit but they were explicit in

their confusion as to where, legitimately, the limit should be. They likened the tension of remit to parallel warnings in the United States where there were claims that the legal system there had “*lost the art of drawing the line*” (Howard, 2001). Nevertheless, while maintaining their meritocratic hierarchy, the Managers stressed the need for some form of diversity to stop the development of a blinkered view to life. They recognised the hard work required to have a heterogeneous learning community; staff couldn’t make assumptions, they had to develop skills and change instruction levels to ensure inclusive teaching, including adapting administrative restrictions such as degree completion timeframes. Although they admitted this would be resource intensive, they nevertheless saw the agenda as ultimately positive for the institution to avoid stagnation of teaching methods and to encourage Academic staff not to always look for an academic solution to a pragmatic problem. As a Governor reminded:

*“It’s very easy to live in a silo.....but it’s hugely important that people who go through the hothouse of university don’t live it as a monolithic experience. It is important to encourage diverse students, but the systems designed to meet their needs must not hijack the university from the rest of the university” (Governor C)*

This is, of course, in line with the “Fit” studies, yet again pointing to diversity as a tool for avoidance of stagnation. There was also a challenge by the Managers to the academic claims that wider participation by a non-traditional student body automatically threatened a lowering of standards:

*“Standards must be maintained and should be able to [be] without compromise even if we increase participation” (Manager H)*

However the group were wary of their association with a Government strategy which was open to accusations of being a method of disguising unemployment statistics. They interpreted the Government agenda as a drive to develop all universities into small “Open” universities which they thought unnecessary and threatening to standards of many universities (supporting Halsey, 1992). The potential for this was particularly acute at Admissions stage when staff were

persuaded to consider “academic potential”, in the face of over-subscription of places and few guidelines on the criteria to be measured, and the Managers thought this to be dangerous. With respect to their own particular Ancient, the placing of Mature students on the periphery of the main stage was something for which the Managers could not apologise. Maintaining the institutional identity was always a priority for Managers (and Governors). The critical issue for Managers was to expand the diverse recruitment without a loss of the common culture; opening up without losing cohesion. Unfortunately, they understood that the justification of the need to protect one’s institutional identity, could, by definition, have been simply an excuse for resisting change (Becher, 2001). Nevertheless, although a need to be inclusive was acknowledged, the pendulum of complying mechanically with anti-discrimination policy was seen to be swinging back with staff ready to explore the definition of reasonable application.

Managers were in a difficult middle position; they were accountable to Governors reluctant to change the format, aiming to develop an institution which would contribute to the betterment of society while also accountable to a Government enforcing an agenda designed for institutions with very different profiles to that of the isolated Ancient. Having to speak a rhetoric, to which some admitted they were not wholeheartedly committed and which could change with a new successive Government, had led, in their opinion, to concern that a form of fatalism had set in to the Managers (supporting a theory of Huxham & Beech, 2003:72). As the Managers struggled with the political compliance, they considered structural institutional adaptation aimed at encouraging inclusion, including student governance systems, and took comfort in the belief that there was extensive agency available to Mature students. However, the uptake of this opportunity would appear to have been overestimated by the Managers. Interpreted by the Mature students as an institution with a structure designed for traditional, mainstreamed students, they may have had the opportunity, but they actually exercised a low level of that agency.

### Summary of the Managers' Construction of the Mature student

Managers, although recognising the critical role of research, nevertheless, on balance, saw teaching as another critical if not an equal priority for the Ancient. This was seen especially in terms of collecting revenue and enhancing the university's national and international reputation, thereby setting up or sustaining a virtuous cycle. The Managers differentiated between remit and purpose, the exact line defining remit, however, proving difficult to draw given increasing Government involvement. One example of the difficulties this caused Managers was the conjecture that academic potential could be assessed at point of selection. Although accepting the Government's Wider Access agenda, the Managers' main concern was the unrealistic expectation that application of this agenda could be standardised across the sector without taking into account the individual profiles of institutions. Managers were trying to tick Governmental boxes designed without any allowance for the fixed, essential aspects of the institutional identity. There was some discomfort that, perhaps, Mature students would have difficulty repaying the educational debt and that a link to employment would be a fragile base on which to rest the motivation for their engagement with HE.

### **13.7 The Governors' Construction of the Mature Student**

Having defined one institutional purpose as "society betterment" or "making good people" (Chapter 4), it would seem logical for the Governors to embrace the introduction of HE to any age group, welcoming the "Lifelong Learning" agenda with eagerness. However, (linking to Foucault [1980] in Chapter 4), the use of the institution as a engineering tool for society denied individual agency, disregarded the personal investment and sacrifice and was thus considered suspicious by the Governors. They considered it to be an irony that the institution, faced with monitoring for compliance to discrimination legislation, had become more unequal in the past decade than it was before, and, in this, they did not see it as different from any other university. Some were convinced that the artificially wide expansion

of the university sector in the early 1990s had indeed cast into stark relief a two-tier system with more inherent inequalities.

Adhering solidly to the maintenance of the elite academic standards, and even more determinedly to the integrity of institutional identity, the Governors advocated that the Managers desist from a knee-jerk reaction of compliance with Government demands, suggesting they assess which initiatives applied to that institution, based on its organisational identity. The alternative was seen to be an immediate threatening of standards. Accompanying this, the Government funding programme was seen to favour the Post-1992 institutions but the result was a starving of resources for those “elite” institutions which, with minimised financial support, became less accountable to the Government.

Recognising the strict accountability to current Government demands while multiple mainstreamed applicants queued at the door of the institution, knocking to get in, Governors did not rank the business argument for Mature students as valid. The Governors questioned the morality of an institution encouraging Mature students to enter HE without considering the implications to both the student and the institution. On one side, personal financial debt is stored up, with a reduced number of years to work to repay the investment making the statistical chances of gaining a more lucrative lifestyle at the end far from secure for Mature students. On the other side, increased institutional resources required alongside significant Government investment from taxation into the sector have not, it is claimed by Governors, been realised.

With the exception of one, the Governors did question if the place for Late-life students to learn, although an excellent and valuable activity, should be in an Ancient. They suggested that L-LSs should undertake courses run as extra-curricular, while M-LSs could have a valid place in the institution if they chose to join after transparent understanding of the risks they were taking financially was facilitated. This group was most comfortable, unconditionally, that the university

should be encouraging to the YMS who had not had the opportunity to attend before, or, special circumstances having disadvantaged previous attempts, needed a second chance.

#### Summary of the Governors' Construction of the Mature Student

The Governors were specific in their views that the university purpose was to create “Good People” and a “Good Society”, and thus, the encouragement of lifelong learning and Mature student engagement was compatible to their minds. They welcomed the Mature student vitality in the classroom; they, in principle, enjoyed the image of Mature students offering a rich source of life experience within the academic setting to the benefit of mainstreamed students.

However, although motivated to become involved on a voluntary basis with the work of the University, the Governors were, nevertheless, business people and, as such, had problems with establishing a business argument for using up a university place on Mature students other than those of the YMS group. They searched for reassurance that the institution was not colluding in a Government exercise of social engineering which resulted in M-LS participants accumulating vast levels of debt with little chance of payback. They also doubted the quality of the experience that non-residential, Mature students could have at an Ancient residential university. As trustees of the institution, they had interests in retaining the institutional identity and were defensive against moves by stakeholders to change critical aspects of the service delivery if they were seen to encroach on that.

### **13.8 Shared Understandings**

In addition to the specific perspectives of the six main categories of participants in this study, the following understandings were themes shared by more than one group:

### 13.8.1 Purpose

Improvement to self-image was recognised as a strong motivation by all categories, both in terms of expectations of the students, and the staff. The shared understanding was that people wanted to gain confidence by rising to personal challenges where they could be acknowledged as useful (Sennett, 2006). All six groups believed that university was a mechanism to achieve this. A critical motivating factor shared by all student participant groups was that of “Escape”: from an unhappy marriage; from boredom; from loneliness; from an unfulfilling life, and, for one participant, from having to sit around in a stressful waiting game while a legal case evolved over years.

All the student participants felt special because they had been accepted by an institution which they held in high prestige terms. The university reputation put a label of worth on the degree which would in turn label the owner as an accomplished person and complete the motivation for all three categories: to recast themselves as higher actors in a higher arena. None of the groups accepted the “hype” about all degrees being the same. They trusted that a degree from this Ancient institution was of a prestigious standard, prestige being inextricably linked with age, while “value-added” carried with it a level of employability. Although league tables and possible networking with the social elite were considered, the majority based the reputation on the history, ancient architecture and age of the institution.

One task, identified as a core task of Government, was thought by all participants to be that surrounding the managing expectations of the general purpose of universities; delineation of remit, of what should be delivered and in what available formats. However most were of the opinion that the Government was failing to do so and, as a result, individual institutions should hold their identity with integrity, declare their service on offer and provide prospective students opportunities to make informed choices as a means of exercising their agency right from the start.

### 13.8.2 Bonding

Once in the university, participants in all six categories noted a sense of identity, and the placement of that identity in relation to others, which could be based on academic ability. Within this arena, academic ability was an alternative criteria to age against which students could measure both themselves and others. In terms of self-definition, the new term of “Independent” was welcomed by all the student groups, being seen as a term which was positive and freeing them from the initial identification of age. The Independent classification eased the pressure, allowing time to develop the academic identity.

Moving on to the identity of the institution, somewhat surprisingly, all categories of participants were wary about changing the institutional structure. Although welcoming some mild adjustments to facilitate student governance and agency, fundamentally they wanted the structure to remain one of catering for young students at their initial independent stage in a residential setting with the focus on traditional, academic, teaching and research. Too many adjustments were equated with lowering of standards and a devaluing of the degree. Even the three Mature student groups saw that, although the Ancient environment may not be ideal for Mature students (identified in line with the conversation on “*Ancient Culture*” in Chapter 1, with all its structural restrictions and cultural barriers), on balance they thought they would gain personal recognition of worth by having achieved their degree within the demands of a strict, delineated regime, competing against mainstreamed students on their terms.

All six groups held a belief that the university was driving the diversity agenda forward as best it could, given its peculiarities, for example its rural location. There were some adjustments requested from the three student categories, and some concessions the three staff categories were prepared to make, but, on the whole, these were minor. All groups defined the principal student agency expressed in their choice of institution and course of study. They did not see it as reasonable for them to complain once they had made their choice and had entered the institutional doors.

The Mature students had a higher rate of attrition than mainstreamed students, especially in early days. However those who stayed had ambition and performed well academically, adopting the education ethos and often continuing to postgraduate study. In all three student categories, if they had been humiliated in the past their determination to perform increased in order to prove others wrong.

### 13.8.3 Reflection

Retrospectively, all three of the student groups thought they had gained hugely in terms of self-worth and self-esteem. Their sense of value was validated by the institution. All were very positive about having completed the course and gained, in the process, a love of education and learning to think. They also gained extensive testing of their organisational skills.

All students had thought about withdrawing from time to time but had found that the temporary hurdle was surmounted relatively easily to allow them to carry on. Four primary reasons were found for overcoming such hurdles:

- Practical assistance (for example, money, deadline flexibility, etc.) came from “*somewhere*” (university department, friends, family, social work department) to help them through.
- People who supported them and whom they could not let down provided encouragement (positive influence).
- People who told them consistently they would not succeed (critical challenge influence) convinced the student to stay to prove them wrong.
- A desire to reinvent themselves, to increase their self-esteem and fulfil their personal target, convinced them to continue with resolve.

### Summary of the Common Themes of Mature Student Constructions

Nobody wanted to change the structural profile of the university. The identity of the institution was seen as aimed at a young, residential population and, given the rural location and the Ancient status of the institution, it was not thought possible to

change this profile without threatening standards or losing institutional identity to the overall detriment of the student experience for all which extended beyond the study experience only. The Gold Standard was not upheld and part of participants' valuing of the degree from the Ancient institution was reinforced by the challenge of a certain level of rigid deadlines, equating the finished product with a sense of worth. From the Mature students' perspective, their agency was exercised in terms of institutional choice. Once inside the door, they seemed reluctant to exercise it further and wanted to fit in with the mainstream. A critical motivation for all Mature students was that of "Escape", although the nature of escape varied between the different student participant groups. They sought self-validation, a sense of worth and usefulness. Throughout the experience, they responded to the challenge of proving other people wrong. In spite of self-reflection prior to entry, all students were surprisingly aware of their Mature student identity as a factor which placed them firmly in the "Out-Group". Overall, all student participants had a positive experience with clear indications of what had assisted in their retention to this point.

## Chapter 14

### Concluding Statement – A Personal View

In having used a constructionist lens, I am aware that my conclusions are not necessarily those of another, but are *my* interpretations of the data. Although other researchers should be able to see my route if they were to examine a specific point in my data subsequently, they would also be able to make alternative interpretations according to their methodological and epistemological influences. The following is therefore presented as my own, personal, reflection on the construction of the Mature student within the context of this Scottish Ancient. I also intend to show how the literature has influenced the direction of my research and the development of my thesis.

For centuries, until the last 30 years, students have been expected to adjust their aspirations and make sacrifices to fit a relatively static university culture which remained unaccountable to society. The “Crisis Theorists” literature of the 1980s warned of the effect of a Government agenda of institutional accountability to two “customers”: society and, more directly, the student. Rather than paying “lip service” to the new duties, studies (Tett, 2004) are increasingly calling upon institutions (especially those with a more “*alien*” structure) to really understand the relationship between student need and institutional culture. Meanwhile, attempting to comply with enforced legislative duties has built up resentment within the HE sector with the sensation of “grief” for a lost culture (Scott, 1995) along with a perception of threat to academic standards (Wagner, 1995). A decade later we have entered a phase in which the Press (Schofield, 2005), research studies (Purcell, 2007) and staff and graduates themselves are beginning to voice concerns as to the worth of the experience, fiscally and psychologically, and particularly in view of the contemporary context of HE incorporating, potentially, over 50% of the population.

This thesis is placed at the centre of that tension and has used the literature surrounding the concept of “Purpose” as a key lens to the debate. Undertaking this

research in my work environment, the Social Constructionist literature has guided the focus of my interest and developed my critical eye in connection with the relationships around me.

In contributing to the Crisis Theorist literature, as represented, for example by Trow (1987) I would contend that the original process of expansion and development of the HE sector was naïve. The “levelling” factor of the “Gold Standard” has clearly not taken into account the disparate features of universities, and this is somewhat ironic given the context where the development of people with individual, and diverse, strengths is a recognised aim. The Ancients have shied away from being labelled “Elitist”, expecting such a description to attract penalties from the Scottish Labour Government. I would argue that a further ironic result in 2008 has been the consolidation of a stratified system of Scottish universities; hierarchical, (although no-one is very sure of the order) when it could have been a system with equal, but different, strengths. Within such a system, the opportunity for the Ancient to promote a distinct, but nevertheless valid, function within HE is lost.

This study is timely. With funding crises in the Scottish HE sector, the Scottish Government (with changed title from “Executive” and elected in 2007 with the first ever Scottish National Party majority) has the opportunity to review the tertiary education system. Within that, it would be helpful to define a legitimate contribution by the “elite” Ancients in Scotland. For my own part, I view their position as one that values excellence in academic matters while indicating a distinct type of student journey. While demonstrating their role in making a contribution to the society to which they are accountable, and rather than focusing solely on the target of the urgent and direct application of the degree label, the value of self-transformation experienced by the students must be proposed as an end in itself. I would argue that, in an increasingly Scottish secular society, the acquisition of self-reliance is a valid target for many applicants. The Ancient in this study, for example, provided an environmental backdrop of an education provided within a

rural, residential and socially self-governing institution, offering distinct opportunities for self-discovery.

The literature surrounding the “Purpose” debate influenced much of the work in this thesis. Struck by the recurrent themes of the Newman (1860) discourses, 150 years later I see the articulating of university purpose as a critical contribution to the success of a future Scottish society. The empirical works of the Student Motivational literature (Archer, 2003, Archer *et al*, 2001), the Retention literature (Tinto, 1975; Yorke, 1998; Christie *et al*, 2002) and the body of work surrounding the Crisis Theorists (Fulton, 1989; Trow, 1987) helped in explaining the tensions within the process of institutional development. However, the fundamental core of these areas kept returning to managing individual expectations and articulating institutional purpose. If an institution aimed to deliver what the student expected to be delivered, the student/institutional relationship started off on the right track and discourses and values had at least a starting point of congruence.

The breadth of literature covered was substantial. However, if I were to choose the studies which most influenced the direction and development of my study, it would be the three which were reminiscent of my previous role as a Student Adviser:

- Duquette (2000): As a practitioner I have spent many weeks of my time, struggling to create ideas and facilitate initiatives aimed at integrating diverse students into the social arena. These initiatives were welcomed by the University and seen as successful thus indicating that they were viewed as institutionally appropriate. It had never occurred to me, prior to reading Duquette, that these might not even be welcomed by the students themselves.
- Berman Brown (2006): I have seen the intimate partnerships of many Mature students dissolve during their course. My study then

took a focus towards examining why, raising the possibility that the marriage was fragile to begin with.

- Chatman (1989) and the work of the “Fit” theorists: The retention literature was, for many years, biased in favour of external burdens, e.g. childcare. Government focused their facilitation on financial aid. Meanwhile students regularly told me that they wished to withdraw because “*I just don’t fit*”. My search turned to theories which could explain this process.

Returning to the introduction, I now wonder if “*Harry*” was an embittered man who absolved himself of any responsibility to adapt the use of his newly acquired knowledge and experience, never mind his degree. Alternatively was he justified in feeling he was promised a pot of gold when, in fact, he was to become the victim of a political sacrifice? Did he gain anything from the degree?

In the student participants’ interviews a common gain was claimed:

*“A sharp learning curve.....but I’ve had my eyes opened”*

This “eye-opening” included having gained critical thinking and presentation skills; they acquired insights enabling them to address questions never before even considered, and a breadth of knowledge of a world outside of their previously defined view. They gained confidence in their academic ability; they met people from all walks of life, they found fraternity. Many thought they had made themselves more employable. Not one student participant regretted having undertaken a degree course, and, in particular, within an Ancient. I challenged them that this was post-rationalisation of a poor decision but, without exception, they rejected such a suggestion. They felt they had transformed themselves for the better, and, in spite of substantial sacrifices in some cases, they pledged to the ethos of higher education.

I claim that there is a valid and distinct place for Ancients and their culture within Scottish HE and that Mature students can benefit personally from study in that environment. However, I still hold the following aspirations for this thesis:

- Reassessing interactions

I want it to be thought-provoking for anyone who reads it and, if they are working in the HE sector, I want them to think of applications within their own environment, testing the appropriateness of current methods of student/university interaction.

- The Management of Expectations

Academics might start to ask themselves what their students expect from them, and how different students might expect different returns on their investment. However, currently the identity of Academics lies in a research orientation and so a raising of the teaching role would have to take place first.

- “Ancient” marketing

Mature students could be encouraged to think carefully before undertaking a course of study at an Ancient but to come with the expectation of gaining critical thinking skills, personal development, intellectual stimulation, not simply a financially lucrative job. Ancients should be marketing themselves not only in terms of the destination (the degree) but also in terms of the journey of the study experience.

- Government Review

I could provide useful material supplementary to the increasing number of voices calling for a review of the Government policy which has encouraged a broad diversity of students to enter HE environments without consideration of their degree application and with the prospects of

poor financial reward or even being able to afford the consequences of entering HE in the first place.

- Prospective Information

Consideration could be made of where responsibility for providing information on choices and consequences of HE lies at the point of engagement. The institutions, ostensibly competing in a single market, are likely to be reluctant to provide this, while the Government, focused on a collective, societal, betterment, may neglect the individual student's needs.

- Mature Student Service Provision

A development of focused services for Mature students should be made if universities are to recruit them actively or otherwise. They do add richness and depth to the classroom debate and the exploration of academic ideas. However, they require some specific facilities in return and my data has shown these not to be excessive in demand.

On a personal note, as a "Mature student" myself, during the process of this Ph.D, (a third role) I can relate readily to the personal growth described in the student participants' statements. The process of researching and writing has contributed to my own knowledge, but I, too, have acquired critical skills, learned to think, to question, to justify: skills I had not even recognised were previously absent.

I embarked on this study to underpin a personal belief that my day role was providing "something" worthwhile to benefit the lives of the Mature students we were encouraging to enter. Although that "something" was not the same as I had expected, nevertheless I now have that reassurance.

## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1 - Definitions

In addressing these issues when dealing with less than precise terms, clarification of terms used rendered some concepts more manageable and minimised misinterpretation. Some key terms used in this study which require clarification at this stage include:

**The organisation** – The institutions are defined by the combination of four representative elements:

1. Estates (buildings, property etc.)
2. Staff (with an employment contract either temporary or permanent)
3. Students (with matriculated, graduating status)
4. Publicity material with the official logo of the University certifying authority.

**Mature** - Amongst university administrators in Scottish Higher Education (HE) the commonly accepted age of delineation between “non-mature” and “mature” is aged 21 at point of entry as a first time undergraduate, and this has been further validated by the Scottish Universities Council on Entrance (SUCE). It is important to note that although there are clearly different phases of maturity, 22 years will equal 55 years given the Universities-Scotland classification. The university will treat them as though their requirements both as citizens and as students are the same.

**Student** - The intention is to examine groups who share points of similarity but may also have significant differences. Mature Students studying part time in the evening will be compared with those studying full time during the day. Those who choose to stay and complete their course will be examined as well as students who, in the past two years, have chosen to withdraw according to Registry data, i.e., have officially registered as “*permanent withdrawal*”. The common denominator is that they all are, or have been, matriculated undergraduate students on graduating programmes of study.

***Part-time*** is defined by the Registry office dictated in the University of St. Andrews by registering for *up to and including* 80 credits per year. (This compares with 120 credits of a full time course)

***Non-traditional*** – The definition cited by Osborne, Leopold et al (1997) is useful here. Two factors are deemed essential – the first being that the student will be over the age of 21 years at entry and the second being that he/she will come from a category technically classified as “under-represented” in higher education, e.g. ethnic minority, socio-economic group IV or V. (Universities-Scotland 2004)

***Educational Establishments*** - defined under section 135 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and includes both Designated and Central Institutions.

***Traditional/Ancient University***– The “Traditional” or “Ancient” Universities are those conferred with royal charter prior to 1900 at which point there were seven universities in Britain in total. Of these, four were Scottish: St. Andrews, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Post World War Two, the “modern”, (sometimes termed “Plate glass”), universities developed including Dundee, Strathclyde and Heriot-Watt. Further university status was then conferred post 1992 on what can be termed the “designated” universities (e.g. Paisley and Abertay, Dundee). (Universities-Scotland, 2005)

In terms of the influence of tradition over Ancients, the strength of tradition lies in its comfort for those accustomed to it. It also provides a source of weakness when that comfort is tested.

***Higher Education*** – Universities- Scotland (2005) says:

*“There is no simple definition of higher education.....A higher education qualification at degree level takes a minimum of three years to complete, more typically four. It will have a theoretical underpinning, it will be at a level which*

*would qualify someone to work in a professional field and it will usually be taught in an environment which also includes advanced research activity”.*

**University** - All universities are private bodies with charitable status. Each is overseen by its own Governing Body which has a majority of lay members. A list of these is outlined in Appendix 2

**Higher Education Institution (HEI)** – a number of colleges provide further (FE) and higher education (HE) and assess a wide range of HE level courses with several thousands of students enrolled on programmes at this level. However they have not received University status. A list of these is covered in Appendix 2

**Further Education (FE)** – according to The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act, 2005 “(1) In this Act (subject to subsection (2)), “fundable further education” means any programme of learning (which is not school education within the meaning of the 1980 Act) which —

- prepares a person for a vocational qualification;
- prepares a person for—
  - (i) a qualification awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority; or
  - (ii) a General Certificate of Education qualification of England and Wales or Northern Ireland;
- prepares a person for access to a course of fundable higher education;
- is designed to assist persons whose first language is not English to achieve any level of competence in English language;
- provides instruction for persons who are participating in a programme of learning referred to in this subsection and who have support needs;
- prepares a person for participation in any programme of learning referred to in this subsection.

(2) In this Act, “fundable further education” also includes education of a type described in subsection (5)(b)(ii) to (iv) of section 1 (duty of education authorities to secure provision of education) of the 1980 Act.

***Independent*** - The Student Awards Agency of Scotland defines an independent student as able to meet one of the following conditions:-

- aged 25 or over before the start of the academic year for which they are applying
- married or entered into a civil partnership before the start of the academic year
- self supporting for at least three years before the start of the first academic year of the course.
- a parent and have a dependent child prior to the start of the academic course
- have recently been in care or be irreconcilably estranged from parent(s)
- have no living parents

***Disabled student*** - Registered as disabled under the terms of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act or the Special Education Needs and Disability Act, 2001.

***Special Needs*** - A term which is applied to students who may not have a registered disability but have a need recognised under the wider access programme assessed by internal university Support Staff. These needs might relate to religion, age, childcare, care for sick relatives, or perhaps temporary disability.

***Mainstreamed*** - used within this study to capture the body of students who are not categorised as “Independent”, “Mature”, “Disabled” or registered with special needs. They will come to university as school-leavers, under the age of 21, and will have neither dependents nor spouses, instead relying on part of their funding to come from parental sources.

## Appendix 2

### List of Universities and Higher Education Institutions in Scotland<sup>35</sup>

#### Universities

- University of St. Andrews
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Dundee
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Glasgow
- University of Strathclyde
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- Heriot-Watt University
- The Open University in Scotland
- University of Stirling
- The Robert Gordon University
- Queen Margaret University
- Napier University
- University of Abertay Dundee
- University of Paisley

#### HEIs which are Education Establishments

- UHI Millennium Institute
- Bell College of Technology
- Edinburgh College of Art
- Glasgow School of Art
- Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
- The Scottish Agricultural College

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<sup>35</sup> Universities-Scotland, 2005: *“What is Higher Education”*.

## **Appendix 3**

### **Literature Search Method**

#### **Target focus:**

Organisation Theory: - Limited to universities, higher education institutions in the UK and examining change processes including barriers

Student Experience: - Limited to studies within the UK, focusing on diverse students undertaking undergraduate courses in universities.

Methodology: - Social Construction and Interpretive approaches.

#### **Search Phrases:**

1. Higher Education, University, Change, Barriers, Organisational Identity.
2. Attendance/Education/Degrees/Wider Access, Participation
3. Disability, Disabled Students, Ethnic Minority Students, Ethnic Diversity
4. Class Structure, Disadvantaged Background/Students/Educational Background, Access and Participation.
5. Mature, Mature participation, Access, Mature Students
6. Social Construction, Interpretivism

#### **Journals consulted (and revisited)**

Academy of Management Journal

Academy of Management Review

Active Learning in Higher Education

Adult Education Quarterly

Annual Review of Sociology

British Journal of Educational Studies

British Journal of Management

British Journal of Sociology

British Journal of Sociology of Education

Disability and Society

Education and Training  
Educational Administration Abstracts  
Gender and Education  
Higher Education  
Higher Education in Europe  
Higher Education Quarterly  
Human Relations  
Human Resource Management Journal  
International Journal of Inclusive Education  
International Journal of Management in Education  
Innovations in Education and Training International  
Journal of Adult and Continuing Education  
Journal of Applied Psychology  
Journal of Applied Social Psychology  
Journal of Business Research  
Journal of Educational Media  
Journal of Educational Policy  
Journal of Experimental Social Psychology  
Journal of Further and Higher Education  
Journal of Higher Education  
Journal of Management  
Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology  
Journal of Organizational Behavior  
Journal of Personality  
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology  
Journal of Sociology  
Journal of Vocational Behaviour  
Learning and Instruction  
Learning in Health and Social Care  
London Review of Education  
Open Learning

Organization Studies  
Organizational Dynamics  
Quality Assurance in Education  
Review of Higher Education  
Review of Educational Research  
Research in Higher Education  
Research into Higher Education  
Research in Post-Compulsory Education  
Research Papers in Education  
Scottish Journal of Political Economy  
Sociology  
Sociology of Education  
Social Research Methodology  
Sociological Review  
Studies in Educational Evaluation  
Studies in Higher Education  
Social Psychology of Education  
Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning

#### APPENDIX 4 - MATURE STUDENT RESEARCH LIST – 2000 - 2007

Criteria: Empirical research Studies in the UK Mature Students in Higher Education

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Findings</b>
1.	2000	Marks	<i>Performance implications of leader briefings and team interaction training for team adaptation to novel environments</i>	Young working class “breadwinners” from Merseyside	Attitudes towards H.E.	Universities need to change if they are to offer an image and environment that will appeal to working class males
2.	2000	Peters	<i>“Realising what I truly am”: Mature women into higher education</i>	Female mature students	Combining of studies and personal lives	Assesses the approaches of staff and relationships with other students, and gives examples of juggling lives
3.	2000	Sewell	<i>Mature Students in part-time higher education- perceptions of skills</i>	299 mature students at Birbeck College, London	The skills mature students bring with them to University which might be used in their teaching	Skills include organisational, time management, assisted suggestions for learning and teaching strategies
4.	2001	Cantwell	<i>A comparison of the academic experiences and achievement of university students entering by traditional and non-traditional means.</i>	Broad section of non-traditional students	Assesses their academic performance in comparison with traditional students	Finds that non-traditional student perform marginally worse – except mature students who performed better

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Findings</b>
5.	2001	Davies	<i>For me or not for me? Fragility and risk in mature students' decision-making</i>	New mature applicants and entrants of 9 case study H.E.Is	Explores the decision making process for those students returning to study	Believes that the payback on their investment would be high, but the concepts of fragility and risk are reflected upon
6.	2001	Egerton and Parry	<i>Lifelong Debt</i>	Cross section of students, including mature students	Investigates recouping the cost of study	Mature students, both male and female, will not recoup the cost of study
7.	2002	Fuller	<i>Widening participation : the place of mature students</i>	New mature recruits	Explains the growing importance of H.E. to mature students	Explores individual motivation and draws conclusions for Policy makers in terms of recruitment
8.	2001	Maher	<i>Women's studies in England: mature women students and their educational vision.</i>	Female mature students at the University of East London	Explores meanings women give to their education	Identified dichotomies within H.E. including experience vs. theory, research vs. teaching. Socially constructed methods to keep some students, including mature, at the margins of H.E.
9.	2001	Waters and Gibson	<i>Lost at the starting gate: an investigation into the psychosocial causes of withdrawal from access courses</i>	45 mature students on Access Course at University of Derby	(1) Impressions of the Access Course and (2) the Course itself concentrating on student withdrawal	Findings focus on Psycho-Social reasons for withdrawal – guilt, alienation, fear, pressure from family, and ageism

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Findings</b>
10.	2002	Hatt, Baxter and Kimberlee	<i>“It’s our last chance” – A study of completion rates by age at an English University</i>	Mature students compared to young students in a new University in the late 1990s	Identifies reasons for attrition	Young students find the transition more difficult. Identified issues of timing restrictions for mature students with difficulties when personal circumstances fluid.
11.	2002	Reay	<i>Class, authenticity and the transition to higher education for mature students</i>	23 Mature students attending F.E College but transferring to H.E.	Assesses the impact of class on the priorities and choices of these students	Class important indicator of different choices and actions related to H.E.
12.	2003	Bolam and Dodgson	<i>Retaining and Supporting Mature Students in Higher Education</i>	Study of 6 North East England Universities	Highlights issues which impact on retention of these students	Important issues identified include finance, a lack of preparedness for higher education and timetabling.+
13.	2003	Jarvis	<i>Desirable Reading: The Relationship between Women Students’ Lives and their Reading Practices</i>	Mature female students	Explores the use of reading to assist with reaffirming their identity	Argues the use of particular texts could assist to integrate the differing perspectives of women undertaking studies
14.	2003	Murphy and Roopchand	<i>Staying the course: what factors assist completion of Access programmes?</i>	Cross- section of 160 students	Examines the relationship between motivation and self-esteem	Female mature students had highest motivation and self-esteem scores, suggesting this as a vulnerable group

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Findings</b>
15.	2003	Warmington	<i>'You Need a Qualification for Everything these Days.' The impact of work, welfare and disaffection upon the aspirations of access to Higher Education students</i>	New mature students returning to H.E.	Asks the question "What is the significance of getting a degree?" Examines their motives and aspirations	Identifies them as predominantly those on the periphery of the labour market, disaffected by their employment situation. See H.E. as a way to avoid "the dole" and social stigma
16.	2004	Arulampalam et al	<i>A hazard model of the probability of medical school drop-out in the UK</i>	Medical students	Examines drop out influences	Mature students more likely to withdraw
17.	2004	Brine and Waller	<i>Working-class women on an Access course: risk, opportunity and (re)constructing identities</i>	8 mature female students in transition to H.E.	Examines the access process	Transition phase not straightforward but filled with shedding old identities, a period of reflexivity, risk, confusion and contradiction
18.	2004	Cuthbertson	<i>A comparative study of the course-related family and financial problems of mature nursing students in Scotland and Australia</i>	Student nurses – a comparison between Australia and Scotland	Examines course-related and financial problems among mature students	Scottish students have more problems with childcare and the care of elderly relatives

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Findings</b>
19.	2004	Lumb and Vail	<i>Comparison of academic Application form and social factors in predicting early performance on the medical course</i>	Total medical students in first 3 years of medical course at one university in UK (738 students in total)	Compares the social and academic factors at admission at predicting performance	Mature students performed extremely well compared to young students. But retention poor
20.	2004	Osborne, Marks and Turner	<i>Becoming a mature student: how adult applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of higher education</i>	Students in 6 institutions: 3 in England, 3 in Scotland. 4 post 1992, 1 modern and 1 Ancient institution	Motivations to engage with HE, assessment of processes between considering HE and entering.	6 categories of motivations are discussed.
21.	2004	Tett	<i>Mature Working-Class Students in an "Elite" university: discourses of risk, choice and exclusion.</i>	Mature students in an "elite" traditional University	Examines risks and exclusion in mature students in a minority group	Argues it is time the institution tackled its entrenched inequalities. It needs to understand process and structure

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Findings</b>
22.	2004	Waller	<i>"I really hated school, and couldn't wait to get out"!: reflections on "a wasted opportunity" amongst Access to HE students.</i>	Group of adult learners in Further Education Access through to HE course. Longitudinal study	Examines their self declared poor experiences of school which is then acting as a motivation to return to education.	Concludes that, although some similarities exist, it is not helpful to categorise groups of these adult learners since they are all too individual to do so.
23.	2005	Carney and McNeish	<i>Listening to the needs of the mature student</i>	43 Mature students in year 2 undergraduates at Scottish Ancient university	Qualitative project to inform practical management of mature students on entry to HE	Highlighted some interventions which Mature students themselves would put in place to mediate the challenges they faced.
24.	2005	Griffiths, Winstaley and Gabriel	<i>Learner shock: the trauma of return to formal learning</i>			Established and examined the process of "learner shock" as mature learners entered the university environment
25.	2005	Hatt, Hannan et al	<i>Opportunity knocks? The impact of bursary schemes on students from low-income backgrounds</i>	All wider access students including mature	Examines the effect of introducing bursary schemes	Students more likely to persist but direct link to finance difficult to establish

	<b>Year</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Findings</b>
26.	2005	Waller	<i>"I Call Myself a Mature Student. That One Word Makes All the Difference": Reflections on Adult Learners' Experiences</i>	20 mature students on Access Course to H.E. at English College	Examines the impact of returning to study	Uses biographical analysis to identify the social context of the interviewees and to emphasise the role of changing identities, personal relationships and risk-taking
27.	2006	Waller	<i>"I don't feel like "a student", I feel like "me": the over-simplification of mature learners' experience(s)</i>	As above	Identity of mature students	Findings indicate that students dislike being categorised as one large group with the common factor of age
28.	2007	Houston, Knox and Rimmer	<i>Wider access and progression among full-time students</i>	Students enrolling for the first time in a post 1992 university in Scotland up to the age of 30	Performance and progression investigated to examine links between age and performance/progression	Equation of wider access to academic success is complicated...relationship is non-linear with influences such as entry qualifications, gender and field of study playing key roles
29.	2007	Purcell <i>et al</i>	<i>Hard Lessons for Lifelong Learners? Age and Experience in the Graduate Labour Market</i>	1995 Graduates – longitudinal study	Analysis of graduates in 1990 showed those over the age of 30 had difficulty finding employment. This study updates that research.	Confirmed pattern...mature graduates were more likely than younger peers to have difficulty in getting employment, less wages & higher level dissatisfaction

## **Appendix 5**

### **Additional information for ethical consideration**

**submitted to Ethics Committee - September 2005**

#### Purpose of Study

A maximum of 24 students, registered as “mature” at the University of St. Andrews are to be selected for interview to attempt to understand the meaning of the mature status with relation to their experience at the University. Some members of staff, with particular responsibility for providing services to these students will be asked for their perceptions of what difference the mature status has on the service provision.

Students will be interviewed and instructed on the use of diaries which will be issued to them. From that point on, for a period which will last through first semester, the students will keep diaries of the most significant events in their “mature student” lives and will describe the attached meaning of the experience to them. Their perceptions of the institution and of the experience of studying will be noted by them for future discussion.

In second semester these students will be interviewed for approximately an hour each and the diaries which they have submitted will provide a focus for the discussion, expanding on the points of significance which they have noted. Reflection points of interest will include the following:

#### **Pre-Reading Week - September / October**

1. Pre-admission – advertising; reputation;
2. Personal motivation; expectations

3. The St. Andrews physical environment;  
Transport to and from university
4. First Stages - orientation; matriculation;  
welcome information
5. Accommodation
6. Meeting new people
7. Dealing with the University "Admin"  
fee paying; information provided

**Reading Week – Christmas - November / December**

8. Student activities – social clubs;  
societies; sports opportunities; culture
9. Academic life – Timetabling; Staff  
attitudes; Teaching; hours of private study
10. Non-Academic units – library; childcare  
IT; careers
11. Informal socialising – peer support
12. External pressures – family commitments;  
health concerns; finances; part time job?

**Xmas - End of Semester 1 – January 2006**

13. Support systems –SSS; chaplaincy; wardens;  
tutors; representation; Students' Association
14. Other students – peer support
15. Academic pressures
16. Exam/revision pressures
17. External pressures – family commitments;  
health concerns; finances; part time job?
18. Dealing with the University "Admin"  
feedback and responses to complaints.

Students are to be selected in two ways:

Part time evening degree students and Access summer school students are to be invited to volunteer at open meeting at the beginning of semester. Four students will be chosen from each to ensure a cross section of representation of age, ethnic group, gender and faculty. Four other groups have been identified for focus; 1<sup>st</sup> years, Final years, 2/3<sup>rd</sup> years and mature students who withdrew prior to the end of their course within the two preceding years of the study. Four students will be chosen from each group. These students are to be identified randomly through the Registry database and invited to participate by email. No coercion is to be employed whatsoever.

Chris Lusk

## Appendix 6

### Invitation to Participate in a study on the experience of mature undergraduate students at the University of St. Andrews.

Sept 2005

#### Invitation Template

**Dear.....**

As a fellow student at this university, I write to ask for your help. Your name has emerged randomly from the computerised records held in registry. I do not have any information about you and I am simply passing this letter to you through the registry assistants. I write to ask for your help and I ask you please not to throw this email into the bin until you've read it!

I am currently completing a PhD degree researching into the mature student experience in Scottish HE. Government pressure has been steadfast in past years, encouraging people to take part in the "lifelong learning experience". However the time has come to try to understand what this is really like and to see if has matched up to expectations or if the institutions have a different idea about what a mature student needs than the mature students have.

I hope that, by finding out what it is really like for the people who have had the courage to do it, we can advise policy makers. These are the people who need the information if they are to use their authority to identify areas requiring change, adjust expectations, and implement systems to help.

I need 24 mature students, from 6 different stages in their academic life at this university to tell me what the actual experience is really like and what it means to you – during the first semester this year only. I will be undertaking this study at other universities also.

Your name has come up as 1 of the 4 students at your particular stage. Would you be prepared to participate?

The time commitment is as flexible as you want it to be. It involves, at most, 2 short individual interviews with me and then noting down what your observations are during the next couple of months. And I shall assure you now that no names will be used at any time in the data presentation at the end. Your participation will be entirely confidential...by which I mean specifically that any discussions will be

kept anonymous, any material used will be checked by you first and, other than the fact that you are a mature student, there will be no identifying features anywhere.

If you would be prepared to give up a little time to take part in this research I should be very grateful if you would email me on [clusk@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:clusk@st-andrews.ac.uk) or phone me at the no. below and I can arrange to meet up with you and explain more.

Who knows? A nice by-product might be that self reflecting on your experience might just help you along in your study experience!

Yours,

Chris Lusk  
Tel: 07736 212599

## Appendix 7a

### Ethics Consent Form for Student Participants

12<sup>th</sup> September 2005

Dear participant,

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Chris Lusk \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

The purposes of this project are:

- 1) To fulfill a course requirement for Ph. D. study in Management
- 2) To identify the mature student experience at the University of St. Andrews.

I will use the information from this study to explore what the experience of being a mature student means to them; how it is perceived on a daily basis and how the reality compares to their expectations. I will also examine how the mature students' understanding, as described by them, fits with the role as constructed by those providing services for these students.

I guarantee that the following conditions will be met:

- 1) Your real name will not be used at any point in the written report: both you and your place of residence will be given pseudonyms that will be used in all verbal and written records and reports.
- 2) If you grant permission for audiotaping, your tape will only be used in this study and will not be used for any other purpose.

3) Your participation in this research is voluntary; you have the right to withdraw at any point in the interview.

4) You can choose to receive a draft copy of the report so that you have the opportunity to suggest changes to the researcher.

5) You can choose to receive a copy of the final report.

	Yes	No
Do you grant permission to be quoted directly?		
Do you grant permission to be audio taped?		
Do you wish to receive a draft copy of the report?		
Do you wish to receive a final copy of the report?		

I agree to the terms

Respondent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the terms:

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 7b**

### **Ethics Consent Form for Staff Participants**

#### **Staff and Institutional Management Interviews**

29<sup>th</sup> January, 2007

Dear participant,

Researcher: Chris Lusk

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. It should be read in conjunction with the study's abstract which will outline the objectives of the study in more detail. Additionally, the questions to be asked in the interview will accompany this document to allow advance perusal.

Ethical approval for this project has been gained from the School of Management's Ethics Committee and has been noted by the University's Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC).

The purposes of this project are:

- 1) To fulfill a course requirement for Ph. D. study in Management
- 2) To construct a picture of the staff and institutional management perspective of the mature student experience at the University of St. Andrews

Information from this study will be used to explore what the experience of being a mature student means to them; how it is perceived on a daily basis and how the reality compares to their expectations.

I will also examine how the mature students' understanding, as described by them, fits with the role as constructed by those providing services for these students. As a consequence, I am trying to gather personal viewpoints from a selection of staff (academics, managers,

administrators and policy makers) on what they expect from mature students and how they view the government's widening of access to include these students in a traditional setting such as St. Andrews.

I guarantee that the following conditions will be met:

1) Your real name will not be used at any point in the written report. If it is essential to give a sense of context to the script you will be given a pseudonym and your details will be coded for use in verbal and written records and reports. Individual anonymity will be preserved, being mindful that, for example, job titles and details of work may reveal identities indirectly.

2) Your participation in this research is voluntary; you have the right to withdraw at any point in the interview without explanation.

3) You can choose to receive a draft copy of the report so that you have the opportunity to suggest changes to the researcher.

4) You can choose to receive a copy of the final report.

5) The data collected from this interview will be stored (coded) in privately locked facilities with no-one, other than the researcher, able to gain access. The data will be kept until graduation with the Ph.D. degree is obtained. However, thereafter, the data will be shredded.

I agree to the terms

Respondent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the terms:

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 8**

### **Journal Reflection Points**

#### ***Session 2005 - 2006***

#### **Pre-Reading Week - September / October**

19. Pre-admission – advertising; reputation;
20. Personal motivation; expectations
21. The St. Andrews physical environment;  
Transport to and from university
22. First Stages - orientation; matriculation;  
welcome information
23. Accommodation
24. Meeting new people
25. Dealing with the University “Admin”  
fee paying; information provided

#### **Reading Week – Christmas - November / December**

26. Student activities – social clubs;  
societies; sports opportunities; culture
27. Academic life – Timetabling; Staff  
attitudes; Teaching; hours of private study
28. Non-Academic units – library; childcare  
IT; careers
29. Informal socialising – peer support
30. External pressures (1) – family commitments;  
health concerns; finances; part time job?

#### **Xmas - End of Semester 1 – January 2006**

31. Support systems –SSS; chaplaincy; wardens;  
tutors; representation; Students’ Association
32. Other students – peer support

33. Academic pressures, submitting coursework
34. Exam/revision pressures
35. External pressures (2) – family commitments;  
health concerns; finances; part time job?
36. Dealing with the University “Admin”  
feedback and responses to complaints.

## Appendix 9

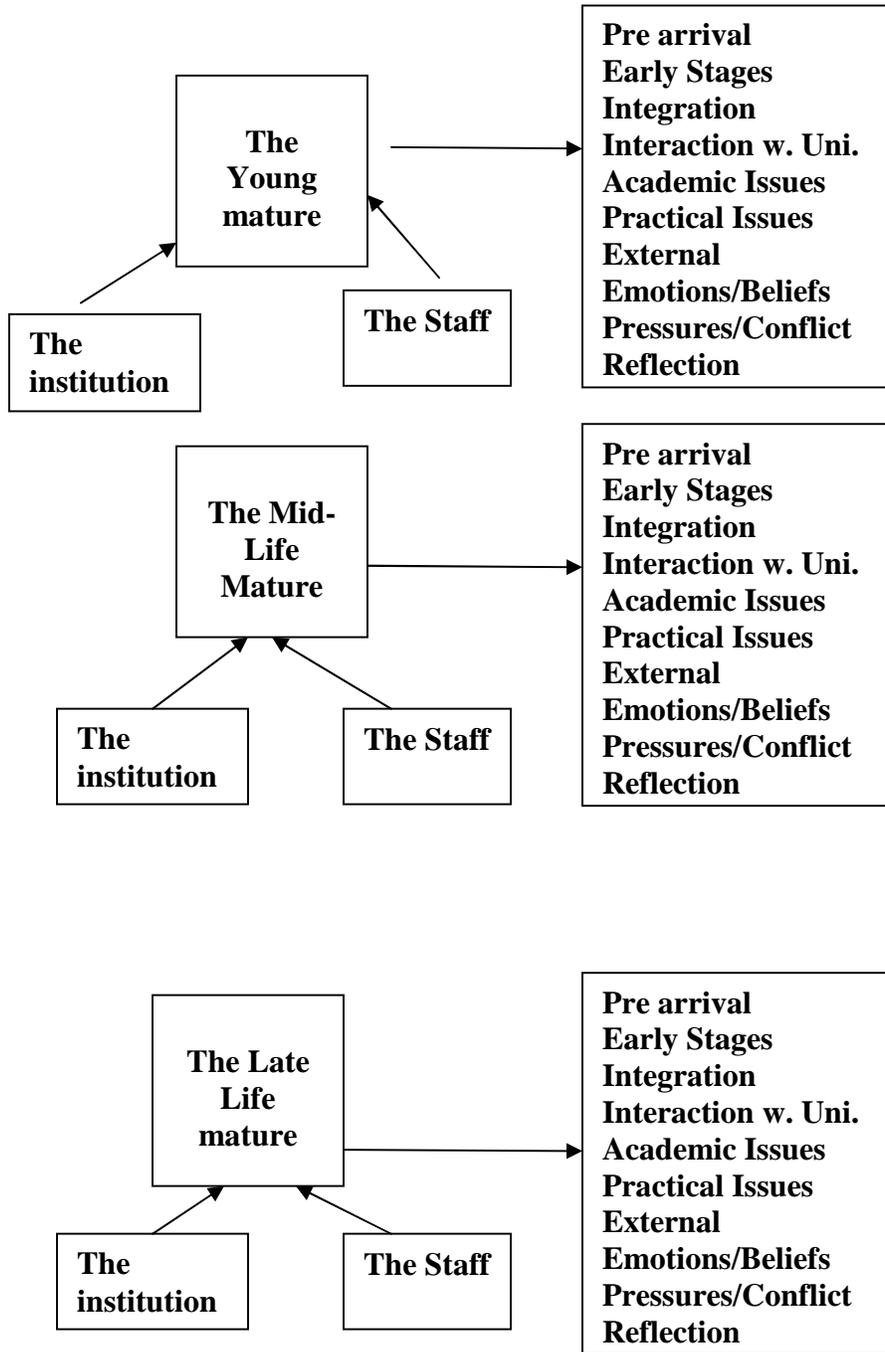
### Coding

<b>Pre Arrival</b>	<b>Expectations</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Image of St. Andrews</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Academic</b>	<b>Learning to Study</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Expectations of Academic Pressure</b>	<b>19</b>
	<b>Study Techniques</b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>Choice of Modules</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Initial Phase</b>	<b>Preparation</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Social Integration with young</b>	<b>7</b>
	<b>Social Integration with mature</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Interaction with Systems</b>	<b>Systems aimed at young/culture?</b>	<b>6/26</b>
	<b>Staff not acknowledging experience</b>	<b>5/25</b>
	<b>Dealing with Authority</b>	<b>13</b>
	<b>Respect</b>	<b>15</b>
	<b>Delivery of Service /Admin</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Emotions/Beliefs</b>	<b>Feelings of Isolation</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>Positive Feelings</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>Negative Feelings</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>Self Reflection of age</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>Others' perspective</b>	<b>31</b>
	<b>Changing Values</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Practical Issues</b>	<b>Money</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>Part Time Work</b>	<b>18</b>
	<b>Accommodation</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>St. Andrews' Environment</b>	<b>27</b>
	<b>Hobbies</b>	<b>17</b>
	<b>Pressures/Conflicts</b>	<b>Student Apathy</b>
	<b>Political Voice</b>	<b>20</b>
	<b>Health</b>	<b>28</b>
	<b>Family</b>	<b>30</b>
	<b>External burdens</b>	<b>32</b>
	<b>Organisational</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Retrospective Reflection</b>	<b>Degree Opportunities</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>Evaluation of the experience</b>	<b>24/34</b>

**Appendix 10a**  
**The Mature Student Journey – Data Analysis Map 1**

<b>Pre arrival</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Early Stages</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Social Integration</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Interaction w. University</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Academic Issues</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Practical Issues</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>External Relationships</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Emotions/Beliefs</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Pressures/Conflict</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>
<b>Reflection</b>	<b>The 5 perspectives</b>

**Appendix 10b**  
**The Mature Student Journey – Data Analysis Map 2**



## Appendix 11

### Questions for semi structured, 2<sup>nd</sup> stage, interviews

1. **Pre Arrival**
  - a. Why was it important for you to go to University? What do you expect to gain?
  - b. Why did you chose to come to St. Andrews?
  - c. What preparation did you carry out prior to coming? Instigated by whom?
2. **Early Stages**
  - a. First impressions? Was it what you had expected?
  - b. At what stage were you categorised as a “Mature Student” and by whom?
  - c. Any literature or administration system you remember as being different for you?
3. **Social Integration with other students**
  - a. Did you feel “different” to other students and when? Have other students reinforced this?
  - b. Do you find it easy to integrate with younger students or do you tend to stick with predominantly mature students?
  - c. Do you find it easy to join extra curricular activities with other students?
4. **Interaction with the University**
  - a. With staff. Do you think they treat you any differently? (how does that feel?)
  - b. With Administration. Is it any different (and is that appropriate?)
  - c. With Systems or Opportunities. Are they more difficult for a native student to access or the same?
5. **Academic Issues**
  - a. Why did you choose the courses that you did (did the advising process assist?)
  - b. Have you developed a particular study pattern to suit your new life?
  - c. Performance. Do you have higher levels than young students? E.g. participating in tutorials/aiming high/aiming for what class of degree?
6. **Practical Issues**
  - a. Have practical issues associated with being a mature student (e.g. money, timetabling) influenced your choice of course?
  - b. If you had one thing to make your life easier here what would it be?
  - c. Do you think the St. Andrews environment is a particularly useful one for mature students?

7. **External Relationships**
  - a. Has your relationship changed since you started?
  - b. Has it been harder/easier than expected juggling your two roles and why?
  - c. What thing would you have done differently which affected those you love/care for?
  
8. **Emotions**
  - a. Can you identify times which have triggered a difficult time for you in your student life? (Is there a pattern for negative times?)
  - b. How do you see yourself in terms of age? Do you feel younger or older now you're at University.
  - c. Do you think attendance at Uni has changed your values in any way?
  
9. **Pressures? Conflict**
  - a. Have you considered withdrawal at any time and why?
  - b. Where have the greatest conflicts occurred with the external life you have and the university life?
  - c. Do you find you can readily get support when you need it? i.e. family, university systems etc.
  
10. **Reflection**
  - a. Did you make the right decision in doing this?
  - b. What now? What are your aspirations after the degree?
  - c. Did you do the right thing coming to St. Andrews?

## Appendix 12

### Student Vignettes – examples of student participants' narratives

I offer these eight narratives of student participants in my study since together they outline many of the points highlighted in the main thesis body. On first impression some of their stories may appear dramatic or sentimental. However, one clear outcome from my research has been the discovery that Mature students often do have unusual stories to tell. I was struck that the hurdles they had overcome to engage with HE; the determination which they displayed was humbling.

The vignettes presented outline the social isolation of the YMS participants, the family burdens of the M-LS participants and the tensions of the L-LS as they are accused of wasting time to fill the need for a hobby. In all cases, the thirst for knowledge has proved a strong driver to overcome major barriers. To take the first example, Nigel's story is typical of M-LSs who can have a mid-life crisis providing an forceful pressure to change current lifestyles

#### **“Nigel” – Mid life Mature Student**

In 2001, at the peak of a successful career as a commercial Pilot, Nigel's life changed when his plane crashed. Although his quick action at the last minute saved his passengers and potential lives on the ground, Nigel was severely injured and left hospital 6 months later but registered permanently disabled. He was implicated in the blame for the crash, an accusation he fought in court until his name was cleared. After much research, he believed that the airline company's lack of adherence to safety policies had been the cause of the accident, a claim the company denied. For 5 years he was immersed in legal action pursuing an apology from the large corporation.

In the year following the accident Nigel found himself recovering physically but feeling emotionally fragile, not helped by the court proceedings underway. He had considerable spare time on his hands and no focus for his future. Nigel describes

how it took over two years to come to terms with the limitations of his health and recognise how to cope with the effects of his injuries. The legal case was consuming his thinking. He “*longed for a distraction*”. While walking his dog along the beach in St. Andrews, he passed by the Admissions office and, “*on a whim*”, went in to find out what would be involved with doing a University degree. He was taken to meet the Admissions officer for Mature Students who, by chance, was available.

*“But for the university having such affable and welcoming staff I would probably have not bothered taking it any further.”*

Inspired by his visit to Admissions, he thought the University offered him some space to refocus. He thought a course of study might “*clear his head*”, give him a “*foothold on the ground*”; something else to think about while the chaos of his personal legal suit was undertaken. Throughout the decision process, he considered other universities but chose St Andrews because of its reputation, and because its location minimised his exposure to air pollution (his lungs having been badly damaged in the air crash).

At various times the court case coincided with exams and assessment deadlines and he has, on occasions, found the stress temporarily overwhelming. However he has identified supportive members of staff. He has also used past, proven, self discipline and is now almost at the point of graduating.

What has university given him? Amongst other things:

*“When I started university I was frustrated, angry, confused about my future. I had conversations in my head, the same conversation often, with the head of the company I was suing. Over the years, University has given me the strength to keep on fighting. Increasingly it has also helped me leave the conversation behind and start to move on.”*

### **Anna - a YMS**

She left home in Europe and travelled around for a few years in the hotel industry. She came to Britain with a hotel job, travelling around the country for some time. After a relationship with a partner broke down she was befriended by a recent graduate from the university in this study who recommended she come to university up here in Scotland.

She was bored, looking for a new challenge. She also thought a university degree would be a way of getting a better job, and “better” had to mean more interesting, involving travel, hopefully, more money. The hotel job she had in the South of England was making her “*brain dead*” and, in essence, she had come to realise that she didn’t want to do this kind of work for the rest of her life.

She had heard the Ancient university was good. Its age convinced her that it was to be taken seriously. However in addition the publicity did have an effect and she states that it appeared so concerned to portray itself as the best that she felt it difficult to not believe it.

She undertook an Access course with other Mature Students in a city university prior to coming to the University. Her experience of young mainstreamed students has shocked her. She had no idea that there would be such a large emotional age gap between them when it is chronologically only 4 years. She has been “*horrified*” at the lack of respect, the lack of independence and the apathy which is displayed by them on a daily basis.

She now realises:

*“I value different things in life than I did at the age of 17, leaving school. My studies, and to do well academically, are very important to me and therefore a high priority aspect of my daily life.”*

However, she worked with the Mature Student Group in the early stages of her time at the Ancient university and was equally disappointed by the lack of acceptance

which she experienced from the older Mature Students. She now feels very much an oddity and has difficulty fitting into either group. Her friends have predominantly come from the Access Summer School.

She has, however, developed a strong search for further education, alongside a confidence which has grown as she has been surprised at her academic competency. She now has determination to undertake a further research degree when she graduates. She is still convinced that an Ancient would provide the best quality education

### **Hannah – a YMS**

She was student in her twenties with a 6 year old child. Coming from the South of England, she did not know anyone in Scotland, far less at the study university, but she took comfort from a friendly website for the University and decided to come since it had an excellent reputation for the academic course that she wanted to pursue and, having taken time to come to university and committed through a substantial sacrifice, she wanted the “*best education*”.

From day one she found she had underestimated the difficulty of:

*“dealing with the conflicts of balancing a demanding timetable and looking after my daughter while trying to fit in a social life also”.*

Finances were tight and childcare was expensive and difficult to organise after school for her daughter, given the rural location. However the social integration was the factor which was pushing her to breaking point.

She found it difficult to infiltrate social groups that had been formed inside the hall of residence system or with people whom she met in lectures and whom, she felt, had no idea of how difficult her life can be. She had expectations of the University to be an intensely exciting and enjoyable time for everyone both socially *and* academically. However without the social support this student found that the

academic aspect suffered. She strongly believed that it is the duty of the University to provide social facilities and systems for Mature Students, especially those with young children and felt very let down by the institution:

*“If I had been given a list of other young mothers’ phone numbers when I arrived, or if we could all have met up at a weekend, or if we had had an email network, I cannot emphasise how enriched my life would have been”.*

This student described her year at the university as *“terribly isolated and lonely”*. However she was academically impressed by the Ancient standing; she just wanted more social facilities to make her *whole* life bearable. She was unhappy that the lack of social facilities had been underestimated by the university.

#### **Linda – M-LS**

A single parent with two children, working locally, she was warned that, in the near future, there were to be redundancies in her section.

With the backing of her long term partner she decided to retrain. She was sure that a degree would increase her employability and should be the first step of a retraining programme and so joined the University’s part-time, evening degree programme. Her sacrifice was not purely financial, given that she still had her daytime employment, but she also had family commitments which were substantial. Her father was proud and supportive from the first day, but her mother took longer to believe that this was a good idea. Her parents did pledge to help her with the childcare and her mother’s opinion changed, becoming very proud as she has progressed.

She met three other Mature Students at the Study Skills course in the first few weeks, an initiative run by this programme, and since then the four of them have met for coffee before classes for mutual academic encouragement. She has found this helpful.

This student travels over 50 miles, round trip, twice a week to attend classes. Shortly after arriving at the institution she was pleased to discover she was pregnant and she continued her studies while planning a wedding and getting ready for her third child. The study has still remained important, but other issues take priorities and the compromises have increased.

*“Juggling my kids’ lives, running them to Scouts and getting to class, driving the distance to the library to discover the books have all gone, having a babysitter let me down, finding space somewhere in the house to study.....”*,

These everyday difficulties have put her in the position of having to think of others first, and only reclaim sections of time for herself to study where possible. On occasion she has chosen her course over some parental duty where her mother has substituted for her, but there has been acute ensuing guilt. She states she has had little or no time for self reflection. She has had emotional dips where she was struggling to continue, especially in winter and driving through rural, icy roads,. However, even with the pregnancy taking its toll on her health in fluctuating periods, she persisted, considering the degree to be critically important to her. She has been surprised at how influential the study has been in giving her a different perspective in life and she is holding on to the feeling that she is becoming something special. She feels honoured at being able to do this and is gaining confidence as her academic ability is registered.

### **Alex – L-LS**

Born into a mining background in a small village, he grew up with a sense of close knit community. Because he was spotted by a local doctor as “having brains”, he was encouraged to enter a “collar and tie” job, and took the military route. He spent over 30 years in the Army which became a structured, close, social environment for him.

He retired from the Army, returning to his home which he came to consider as an “alien” society. He did not know his next door neighbour and he felt an acute lack of community or trust in society. He pined for a feeling of belonging. He tried an ex servicemen’s club. However, to his surprise, he found it populated by civilians or older gentlemen. He didn’t find what he was looking for which he described as a sense of “*camaraderie or fraternity*”.

He always had thought that this Ancient was the top university – the one that was the “*absolutely ultimate*” in prestige terms. However a primary reason for going to university now was simply to get out of the house where he was finding life stagnating, unfulfilling and, often, tense. He thinks that the living at home after having been long periods separated in the military has been difficult for his wife to adjust to. Therefore he finds university a helpful escape from his living environment where he can often think of himself as “a stranger in his own home”. His wife was, and still is, unsupportive and goads him by saying he is “*big headed*” or “*trying to be something he isn’t*” all the time. By the middle of the study time, she had become entirely negative about anything to do with University and she considered it fair to do anything which made his study difficult, for example, using the car so he could not get in to a planned lecture or making it awkward to find space in the house to study.

He didn’t think there would be a pressure between the two roles he would play before he came. But it’s been worse than he expected having to juggle them. Nevertheless, he has no regrets about joining. He has “*loved*” University. He has “*many, many*” young student friends and he has found the “*fraternity*” which he sought. He thinks that if he had stayed at home and not done this course, but just stayed with his wife and “*potted around in the garden like an old age pensioner*” he thinks he would have gone “*right downhill*” and become much older than his years. His only regret has been that he didn’t have the money to up roots and move into a University hall of residence. Once this undergraduate degree is finished, he is considering postgraduate study.

## **Grant – M-LS**

In spite of a difficult home life in his teenage years, he had always been clever at school. However in his mid teens he “lost his way”. He started down many roads to find a purpose and a future career, but did not focus for long on any of them. Wanting to be a pilot, but believing he couldn’t do that, he lost motivation and left school at 15 to start an apprenticeship as a chef. That didn’t last long and he continued to jump from job to job in an attempt to find a focus for his life, trying college courses from computing to nursing.

While attending an “*unfulfilling*” nursing course he met a doctor who inspired him, helped him to focus on his future career path deciding that a medical career would be his target. A turning point for him, rather than mocking him the doctor encouraged him to go for it and, for the first time, although he was by this time 28 years old, he decided to commit. After encouragement from another lecturer (a graduate from the study university), he applied to this specific university and was delighted when they accepted him. For the first time he felt as if he was on track and doing something worthwhile and that felt right for him.

His girlfriend, supporting him, put her career plans temporarily on hold, they married and, expecting their first child, the family moved to the Ancient, rural, university from London. They both believed the study university was prestigious because it looked like an Oxford or Cambridge type of university. It was “*somewhere near the top of the league tables*” and that reinforced for him that it was a worthwhile university to go to. The environment gave him the opportunity of a beautiful place to bring up children. He arrived with excitement and optimism.

After 2 years he describes his biggest pressure as money. He has a part time job cleaning every morning. Child no. 3 is on the way. The finances are very tight:

*“Even when the work is done and the exam is over, that’s the one worry that’s still there. It keeps me up at nights sometimes. In fact the stress of exams and studies are a blessing in disguise as they distract me from the financial worry*

*for a while. We're so tired of never having anything extra; something new to wear...some money to take the kids back to London for a trip to see their grandparents or go away for a day on a family trip or take my wife out.. It's not life threatening; I'm managing to pay the bills – just. But I really get fed up. But then, there's always the [countryside] and it will be worth it for the whole family eventually. I'd like a first class degree, but if the tension gets worse, that will be the first thing to go. My family have to know that they come first”*

### **Lesley – a YMS**

After completing a gap year abroad, having failed to reach her predicted results, she returned to Scotland and entered FE College, undertaking a Communication and Media studies course. The College was in a socially deprived area and she encountered students who were at a different academic stage from her, trying to get standard grades. It became obvious to her tutors that she had “*the smarts*” and so she felt almost duty bound to use them and “go to uni”. The College had an attrition rate of 35% in the first week and aimed for 25% to complete their intended courses. Belatedly she discovered that SQA had made a mistake with her results and she had reached the entrance requirements the year before after all.

She feels positive about the year's delay - the year at college had been a good one and she met the man who was to become her husband there. An ambition developed to become a human rights activist and, she was encouraged by a mentor at the college to choose the study university. She decided that this would be helpful for her future career on her expectation that the networks established there would be politically helpful. Part of her motivation to take part in HE initially had been to give something back to society on a national or global basis. She felt she had demonstrated intelligence and so felt a duty to use it to better society in a philanthropic sense.

Her experience of this particular study university has been mixed. The summer school gave her the friends which she kept, mostly young mature students. She was surprised at the behaviour of mainstreamed students. Both her and her husband were studying but had to live some distance away from the town to mitigate rental

costs. However transport cost her dearly and lunches, hanging around the town with bistro coffee houses, waiting to go home, has increased the cost of living. Eventually accommodation in the town was obtained at a high price. She doesn't identify with the other groups of Mature students; she thinks they seem to dislike anyone under 30.

Money has been the biggest problem. Her husband sometimes wears plastic bags under his socks when it's wet – he has big holes in his shoes. But they're saving up for some new ones. When she goes out she can only get the cheapest drink, not the one she wants. They have both borrowed heavily from parents on both sides.

Interactions with university staff were good on the whole, except one tutor:

*“She was 5 minutes older than me and was unsympathetic when I didn't buy the core text. She accused me of “not being dedicated to the course”. I hadn't bought the text because I had bills to pay. She just didn't get it.”*

At one point she met up with an old school friend who was younger than her but in fourth year at university. She described it as making her feel “old and useless”.

However, on the benefit side, the academic aspect of HE has been fulfilling. She has been inspired in her courses and finds that she has really ignited her appetite for learning.

### **Pauline – M-LS**

She grew up in a European country with her mother, in an intense dual relationship. She was frequently told she was clever, but found writing hard and was accused of being lazy by teachers. She followed a career in mechanics. Having been tied to her mother after school, at 24 she demanded her own life, left home and travelled to Scotland with a boyfriend to work in hotels here. Some years later, working in a hotel in the study town from very early and until late at night, she watched young students and measured their academic input in terms of hours, judging them to be

“doing very little work and achieving degrees”. She began to wonder why she couldn’t do it. In suggesting it, her mother was dubious and the boyfriend was scathing in his rejection of her ability to succeed at such a scheme. She became determined to prove them wrong.

She was forced to study part time at first, but was unconcerned about module choices, rather she basked in the glory that somebody at the university thought she was capable of obtaining a degree. Shortly after arrival she was diagnosed with dyslexia. She became very low, felt angry at having “wasted” 20 years and feeling stupid throughout. She now understood why she had not been able to do things at the time; things she knew she was capable of deep down. She felt very different from the young students around her, (although her dress sense has changed considerably while studying). Even at the end she did not feel like a student; rather she felt like a towns person popping into the university now and again. She enjoyed module work and, on the whole, felt the course was not as academically challenging as she had thought it would be.

The student obtained her degree during this study. Her proud mother attended her graduation. In retrospect, she is glad that she did the course as an adult. She thinks she became an adult around about the age of 28 – 30 and she woke up one day and realised she was able to do what she wanted with her life.

Now, a decade later, she has had many jobs, learned to speak English fluently, and has taken a degree in this foreign language, and, incredibly, by working in multiple jobs alongside, has bought her own house and paid the mortgage off in full during her study period. Meantime her mother’s pride has grown, the student cares deeply for her, bringing her to this country for holidays. She knows that some people admire her, but she does not understand their admiration. She does not feel the degree has given her the added confidence she thought it would. And, ultimately, had a man entered into her life at any stage and offered her marriage and children – she would have dropped everything like a shot and gone with him.

Nevertheless she is glad that the man hasn't appeared yet because she would have regretted it to give up university in the end, she feels. She needed to do something for herself first. In summary?

*“NO REGRETS!! It is one of the best things I have ever done with my life. And values? I have this strong self- belief now. I know; I've proved it, anything is possible!”*

<b>Appendix 13 – Summary of Thesis Contributions</b>			
<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
9	Institutional Purpose	Staff views on Purpose; All - KT low priority, Academics (Research), Managers (Teaching), Governors (Bettering Society)	Theoretical/Political
9	Institutional Purpose	Students views on Purpose – All, Teaching. Second place - KT	Theoretical/Political
9	Institutional Purpose	Additional Staff Purpose suggested of “Ideology”	Theoretical
9	Institutional Purpose	All other staff were uncomfortable with Good Society as a purpose	Theoretical/Political
9	Institutional Purpose	All support Jaspers (1960) interdependency of purposes	Theoretical
9	Institutional Purpose	There is a major mismatch between Students and Staff expectations of institutional purpose	Theoretical
9	Institutional Purpose	Staff adhered to a “Research-Intensive” institution rather than a “Research-Led” one. This may suggest an increase in the profile of the teaching role	Theoretical
9	Institutional Purpose	While accepting that the University experience should produce better individuals, there was widespread rejection of this being extended to a better society	Theoretical
11	Institutional Purpose	Suggestions that Ancients deliver “employability” . The emphasis of this over “vocationalism” should be emphasised prior to entry	Theoretical / Practical Management
9	Motivations	Emphasis should be placed on a “better” job not necessarily being a more financially lucrative one. The adjective can be applied to jobs making someone feel useful (Sennett, 2006), more interesting or in a preferred location.	Practical Management / Theoretical
9	Motivations	An additional motivation expressed by student participants was “Escape”	Theoretical

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
9	Motivations	The Young Mature students expressed selfless motivation in seeking a job with a philanthropic aspect. In contrast the other two groups were more inward-facing in their motivation	Theoretical
9	Expectations	Students expect a direct link to employment	Theoretical
9	Classification of students	The study of Mature students can helpfully sub-categorise into three classifications; Young, Mid-Life and Late-Life. Classifications are based on student experience functions	Theoretical
9	Classification of students	Although identifying others in the “Out-Group”, this group was established with those in the three sub-categories. When trying to establish a broader identity of “Mature student” incorporating all, the differences were too great.	Theoretical
11	Suggested Systems Adaptations	Subject choices are very influenced by external responsibilities. If this is understood by the institution, academic advising should become a more thorough process taking into account individual’s external circumstances	Theoretical / Practical Management
10	Suggested System Adaptations	We cannot assume that “non traditional” student literature advising particular measures can be applied across the whole spectrum of Mature students. One example might be the encouragement towards groupwork although this was not seen as suitable for some of my participants	Theoretical
10	Student Identity	Guilt is the over-riding emotion for those with dependent families	Theoretical
11	Student Identity	The female students suffered a diminishing sense of physical attractiveness and this caused a substantial decrease in their self-confidence. They tried to counteract this by prioritising the value of academic competence in their self-image	Theoretical
10	Student Identity	The “Mature” label is non-essentialist	Theoretical

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
10	Student Identity	Mature students feel honoured to be accepted and, placing themselves as peripheral, are unwilling to exercise agency.	Theoretical / Practical Management
10	Student Identity	While Mature students enjoyed the streamed initiatives (e.g. Access summer school) they were then forced to go through another readjustment of their identity when they entered the main course.	Theoretical
11	Student Identity	Students did not equate a degree with a rise in social class but saw it as a way of ensuring that they did not get left behind in a society where university is becoming the norm	Theoretical
9	Student Identity	In terms of self-worth, admission helped because it came from a “prestigious” institution	Theoretical
10	Social Integration	YMS participants yearned to integrate but were surprised to find little shared values, norms and beliefs and felt placed by the other mainstreamed students on the periphery	Theoretical
10	Social Integration	M-LS participants rejected the chance to integrate only being interested in that which gave academic enhancement	Theoretical
10	Social Integration	L-LS participants were surprised to find they were accepted by the mainstreamed students and integrated well	Theoretical
9	Students - Changing Relations	Late-Life students recounted poor relations at home and lack of family of support. Reasons for this ranged from jealousy to rejection and attention-seeking. It is unclear as to whether the study detrimentally affected the relationship, or whether the “Escape” motivation was because of a poor existing relationship prior to study	Theoretical
9	Staff/Student Relations	In general Academic Staff found Mature students the most rewarding to teach, welcoming the diversity and richness of their search for knowledge.	Theoretical
10	Staff/Student Relations	Junior staff were identified as peers of M-LS	Theoretical

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
1	Research pattern	The research into Mature students is timely and follows a pattern identified in other non-traditional student research	Theoretical
11	Retention	The study explores consideration of withdrawal, but focuses on why attrition is avoided.	Theoretical
11	Retention	Considerations of withdrawal are in more frequent in the first year	Theoretical
11	Retention	“ <i>Saving Face</i> ” is a critical influence for the student participants	Theoretical
11	Retention	Academic weakness was not cited by any participants for a pressure to leave.	Theoretical
11	Loss/Gain	Students loss of security	Theoretical
11	Loss/Gain	Student loss of partnership ; but highlighted (because of “Escape” motivation) addition is question of whether the partnership was less than robust in the first place?	Theoretical
11	Loss/Gain	Loss of close family relations, but highlighted additional loss of future child bearing ability	Theoretical
11	Loss/Gain	Gain of new relationships, including the rekindling of old relationships with a new discourse	Theoretical
11	Loss/Gain	Gain of academic competence; including critical thinking skills, essay writing, presentation delivery	Theoretical
11	Loss/Gain	Part-completion of the degree can be useful, especially in terms of self-confidence enabling other, better, choices in life after leaving	Theoretical
11	Value Congruence	Students reassessed their values post-entry to merge with the institutional values	Theoretical
11	Value Congruence	Student participants aimed high academically	Theoretical
9	Value Congruence	The students defended the “elitist” reputation once they had joined the institution.	Theoretical/ Political Debate
9	Value Congruence	There would appear to be a mismatch between Students’ acceptance of validity of an unaccountable academic freedom. Societal accountability was called for.	Theoretical / Political Debate

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
11	Institutional Purpose	Moving the emphasis from degree award in the university publicity, and placing it on the gaining of self development throughout the journey will manage the expectations of a student on an Ancient.	Practical Management
9	Institutional Purpose	All agreed that Ancient universities are not designed for skills training. This should be emphasised more pre-application	Practical Management
9	Institutional Identity	Transparency of the experience on offer will limit misunderstandings. If the institution is to focus on residential, mainstreamed students this should be a clear part of the recognised identity of the institution	Practical Management / Political Debate
9	Institutional Identity	Prestige was associated with age, history, and league tables. The “Ancient” title heavily influenced recruitment.	Practical Management
9	Institutional Identity	Staff and students were in agreement that this institution has a primary “youth” culture. Students did not seek to challenge this, but would have wished for prior warning	Practical Management/ Political Debate
11	Student Identity	Although the students exercised agency in coming to the university, the agency of all was limited once within the institution.	Theoretical / Practical Management
9	Expectations	Mature students require an advisory interview at application stage to establish expectations in an effort to manage these. Institutional aims of a good “student experience”, according to individual expectations, would be preferential to the retention “tick-box” of current practice	Practical Management
9 / 10	Suggested System Adaptations	Mature students and their families would welcome more direct communication from the University to the family to include them and identify them with the study process.	Practical Management
9	Suggested System Adaptations	Personal, “mentor” approach is helpful in recruiting Mature students. The link is made on a personal basis then between relevancy and validity of student to attend.	Practical Management/Theoretical

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
10	Suggested System Adaptations	Structural complications (for example, transport) should be considered in publicity and in staff training	Practical Management
11	Suggested Systems Adaptations	YMSs are the most vulnerable group. This needs institutional recognition and systems to be adapted to facilitate integration with each other and mainstreamed students. Residential arrangements could recognise the identification with postgraduate students in terms of life experience	Practical Management
10	Suggested System Adaptations	Health concerns need proactive institutional focus to encourage appropriate reporting by these reluctant students.	Practical Management
10	Social Integration	The University needs to understand these three different sets of needs in designing policy. YMSs are the most vulnerable and require social support. Substantive resources should not be wasted trying to encourage M-LSs to socially integrate. Assumptions should not be made in advance about L-LSs	Practical Management
10	Staff/Student Relations	The most tense relationship was that between staff closer in age to the Mature students. Perhaps training for these staff members would be helpful?	Practical Management
10	Staff/ Student Relations	Further training for non-academic staff meeting Mature students may also be helpful in avoiding the disrespect of life experience	Practical Management
11	Retention	Problems can be overcome with pragmatic solutions. If reporting mechanisms can be tightened, attrition should be avoided.	Practical Management
8	Researcher role	The control of the environment by the interviewee is essential to the quality of the data	Methodological
8	Researcher role	Dual role of researcher and institutional manager – advantages and disadvantages.	Methodological
8	Qualitative <i>versus</i> Quantitative	Subjective account of focusing on quantitative approach, finding problems, and identifying how the qualitative approach was designed to answer the key questions	Methodological

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
8	Qualitative <i>versus</i> Quantitative.	The appropriateness of the methodology is dependent on the questions needing answered	Methodological
8	Use of Journals	The journals have been documented as a helpful approach in terms of timing and accuracy, but this study has highlighted the way they became an end to a means for the students themselves	Methodological
9	Institutional Purpose	Some staff were uncomfortable that they were colluding in a Government drive to hide unemployment statistics, resulting in large numbers of young people being in unreasonable debt.	Political Debate
9	Institutional Purpose	Some concerns were expressed about an Ancient university being the most appropriate locus for Late-Life Mature students. There was also surprise at their financial support available to this group.	Political Debate
9	Motivations	Pressure from Government publicity has led to the YMS viewing university as the expected default from secondary education. University has succeeded in becoming the norm, rather than the exception in Scottish society	Political Debate
9	Institutional Identity	20 years after the Crisis Theorists, staff still believe that academic standards are under threat	Political Debate
9	Institutional Identity	The identity of the institution should be articulated and publicised without apology.	Political Debate / Practical Management
9	Institutional Accountability	Call from all participants for Government to consider local structures and institutional identity when auditing and demanding accountability of wider access and diversity	Political Debate
9	Institutional Accountability	Staff think the drive to turn all institutions into “small mini Open universities” is a poor loss of opportunity for all in the Higher Education Sector. Students and Staff support streamlining in broad terms and within institutions but are against narrow specialist universities.	Political Debate

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Area of Focus</b>	<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Classification</b>
9	Institutional Accountability	All staff and students rejected the “Gold Standard” and called for a recognised diverse HE sector, highlighting and supporting strengths of each institution.	Political Debate
10	Suggested System Adaptations	Who should deliver the pre-entry advice? Institution or Government, independent, agencies? Recent literature indicates the financial payback may be tenuous so the calculated gains on offer require transparent Government specification according to institution type	Political Debate

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