A study of learner transition and identity in the FE environment

Thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor in Education

Elizabeth J. Gregory, September 2017
School of Environment, Education and Development
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Abstract

The research reported in the thesis is the Learner, Identity and Transition Project (LITP), and makes a contribution to notions and experiences of academic transition and learner identity, both through the collection and analysis of new empirical data and through the development and deployment of a conceptual framework that I call MERITS Plus. The research adopts a case study methodology through the collection of qualitative data in a college of further education in the North of England in the academic year 2014-2015. The empirical data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with 24 learners, 12 of whom were studying A-Levels and 12 studying a vocational qualification in the form of a BTEC, and from a focus group conducted with five members of staff. The project aims to investigate how choices inter-relate with how and why learners narrate their educational experiences and identities, and addresses this through the consideration of four research questions. The first of these asks, “What factors do learners identify as having impacted on their academic choices in deciding to study either A-Levels or vocational qualifications as a level three programme of study?” and explores individuals’ motivations for selecting a particular college pathway. The second considers, “What ideas and attitudes do learners hold about their chosen qualification on entering the programme, and where have these come from?” and is interested in what learners expect from a particular course before starting their studies. The research also considers, “What is the impact of policy and other existing discourses upon the culture and practice of studying a particular programme, and what effect does this have on learner identities?” and “How do students on different academic programmes narrate their educational experiences, and is a sense of collective identity evident amongst different cohorts?” These questions are addressed through the MERITS Plus model, consisting first, a six-element framework (Motivations, Expectations, Reality, Identity, Transition, and Stories and Synthesis) used to analyse the data and second, using Bourdieu’s thinking tools to examine the complexities raised by the data. By doing so, the study directly presents narratives and uses the MERITS Plus model to create eight composite learner profiles drawn directly from the data to illustrate the range of learner types within one educational setting. The study finds that whilst some similarities do exist across the learners in the setting regardless of academic pathway, such as the importance of social transition in maturing as an individual, a greater sense of cohesion was evident amongst the vocational cohort. The data also suggest that transition is a time of opportunity within the new environment, but tensions may exist in the field of 16-19 education. Whilst the A-Level still appears to carry higher levels of cultural capital, the vocational learner narratives suggested a bid for recognition was taking place and that vocational habitus, if it exists, may be a positive rather than a negative disposition to reveal. Thus the study raises important issues about learner agency and educational structures, the implications of which are fully documented and discussed.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those involved in the delivery of the Ed.D programme at the University of Manchester, with special thanks to my supervisor Professor Helen Gunter. It has been a pleasure to be part of the programme, and some of my fellow doctoral students have become my firm friends. I would also like to thank my ever-supportive family and partner, and express my gratitude to my employer for allowing me to conduct my research.
Chapter One: Introduction to the Aims and Scope of the Study

Introduction

This thesis reports the Learner, Identity and Transition Project (LITP), a study conducted with twenty-four students studying either A-Levels or BTEC qualifications at Northlands College of Further Education (NCFE) (anonymised name) in the North of England. NCFE is my place of work, and is one of 231 general further education colleges in England (AoC, 2014), offering a range of courses at different levels to learners aged from 14 upwards. The LITP is primarily a study of identity and of how young people perceive themselves within an educational setting, but also recognises the impact of academic transition and of policy issues upon an individual’s sense of self within this particular context. Notably I am interested in the interplay between the identities assigned to learners embarking upon different academic pathways by external actors such as parents, teachers and educational institutions, and the learners’ own sense of self perception whilst making the transition from school to college. Methodologically, the LITP uses a case study approach, with the case being learners on two different academic pathways who have been invited to narrate their educational experiences in moving from level two to level three study and from school to college through the use of semi-structured narrative interviews. The case study also draws upon views of teaching staff at NCFE through use of a focus group to discuss eight composite learner profiles that were created directly from the interview data.

The issues discussed in the LITP are part of a wider debate about the perceived value of different forms of knowledges and accreditation, and how this value is conveyed through policy, research evidence and popular discourses, although the focus of the study is the field of 16-19 education in England. Within this field, struggles are taking place in terms of learner identity and transition, and how students know and understand themselves and the academic
choices available to them. The LITP discusses these issues in one particular site, NCFE. The use of narrative interviews with students at NCFE investigates how an individual's sense of identity relates both to their sense of programme identity and to a wider sense of being a college student rather than a school pupil. Thus, by interviewing learners on two different study programmes, the research data and analysis examines the patterns and distinctions in the narratives regarding individual learners who are on similar academic programmes. Importantly, through deploying Bourdieu’s thinking tools I consider evidence of shared and distinctive dispositions and espoused practices regarding learning choices. There is a danger that where distinct and separate academic pathways exist, learners will be pigeonholed, and the study presents a number of composite student profiles based on the interview data to demonstrate the range of individual “types” that may exist within any one educational setting. These composite profiles were discussed by five members of staff in a focus group, in order to obtain their narratives about how well the profiles represented the types of students whom staff had encountered during their professional practice.

As the data were collected in my own workplace, the LITP raises issues about the nature of insider research. I have worked at NCFE since qualifying as a teacher in 2005, teaching A-Level English with little contact with vocational learners. Due to my area of professional expertise, I originally planned to conduct a case study using A-Level learners only. However, the commonality of responses during interviews conducted with A-Level students for one of my pilot studies prompted me to change focus to include both A-Level and BTEC students, in order to investigate whether patterns of similarity were evident across different cohorts. By acknowledging and reflecting on my own existing beliefs and experiences I aim to adopt a level of reflexivity that will mitigate the impact of my own professional autobiography, and a transparency of approach in the design and piloting of the study and the collection, analysis and presentation of data that fosters confidence in the validity of the research and my credibility as a researcher (Patton, 2002).
In order to fulfil my aims, I have developed the following research questions:

- What factors do learners identify as having impacted on their academic choices in deciding to study either A-Levels or a BTEC as a level three programme of study?

- What ideas and attitudes do learners hold about their chosen qualification on entering the programme, and where have these come from?

- What is the impact of policy and other existing discourses upon the culture and practice of studying a particular programme, and what effect does this have on learner identities?

- How do students on different academic programmes narrate their educational experiences, and is a sense of collective identity evident amongst different cohorts?

In addressing these, I have both drawn upon existing literatures and collected my own empirical data with the aim of contributing to the existing body of knowledge on issues of learner motivations, expectations, perceptions of reality, identity and transition. The study locates itself within the interpretivist research tradition in the value it places upon learner narratives in which participants construct their own versions of academic experiences. Thus the LITP focuses on learner voice and how an individual’s perception of their own identity may be reflected through their language choices. The study also draws upon features of ethnographic research in that the case study was conducted in my own place of work and allowed me to understand a particular social phenomenon in situ; in this instance, the perceptions of experience occurring within different groups (Reeves et al, 2013). By taking this approach, the study examines the power structures which underpin academic knowledge and how individual learner narratives may be positioned within these structures. The research also considers which qualifications are perceived to be “high status” knowledge, as well as whether the learners themselves are aware of a sense of academic segregation. Thus the LITP suggests that a particular game is in play in the field of 16-19 education in terms of how
academic choices are exercised, and considers whether societal power relations and values are established, reinforced and reflected through the language used in the learner narratives.

The LITP conceptualises the relationship between academic choices and learner identity by presenting a theoretical framework called the MERITS Plus model, used to examine how learners understand their options and the ways in which external agencies structure those choices. This model in its original form was developed from existing literatures and piloted through fieldwork, and was used to undertake a thematic and linguistic analysis of the learner narratives through the use of a six-element framework consisting of Motivations, Expectations, Reality, Identity, Transition, and Stories and Synthesis. An important outcome of the LITP is the development of this model into its current form as the MERITS Plus model in two key ways. Firstly, in order to trouble the neatness of model and contextualise the findings, the framework now incorporates a number of Bourdieu’s thinking tools (1977, 1986) to provide an additional layer of analysis, and allow consideration of the anomalies within the data rather than reduce rich narratives to a series of reductive patterns. Secondly, whilst the potential of adding the “S” element was identified during pilot fieldwork, the LITP has developed this more fully through the conceptual and empirical work undertaken for this study by using the model in the creation of the composite learner profiles discussed in the staff focus group. The MERITS Plus model thus provides the conceptualisation for the whole study, and by presenting this model the LITP offers a conceptual framework transferable to other educational institutions and age groups as a tool for understanding the types of advice and support which may make transition more successful for students of all ages. Thus, whilst the LITP will be of particular interest to those who govern, research, teach or study within FE colleges, the findings are of relevance to all educational institutions and the communities they serve. As the stepping stone between GCSEs and undergraduate study, there is a need for schools and HE institutions to better understand level three qualifications and the choices made by learners in selecting an appropriate pathway at this level.
The empirical data was collected during 2014-2015, a crucial time for the FE sector in terms of political changes and funding cuts, and in public perception of the pathways available to learners aged 16-19. Traditionally, these learners have had the choice of following either an academic programme – in England, normally A-Levels – in order to progress to university, or a vocational programme such as a BTEC to equip them with the skills required for a particular job. However, the status of vocational qualifications is changing, with a recent survey indicating that more than a third of employers value vocational and academic qualifications equally (CBI/Pearson; 2015), and with more learners entering HE with vocational qualifications than previously (UCAS, undated). Whilst it is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain who decides what value is placed on particular forms of education, the LITP considers how aware learners are of the perceived value of their academic choices and of the discourses that exist around particular qualifications.

The LITP makes an important contribution to knowledge in a number of ways. Firstly, the study reflects the aims of a professional doctorate by pursuing a research area that impacts upon my working life as an education practitioner, located within my own place of work but relatable to other institutions. FE colleges are relatively under-researched compared with schools and universities, despite being the stepping stone for many young people to the next stage of their education or career. The literature that does exist is largely concerned with young people who are not doing well, either academically or socially, with little focusing on those who appear to be doing well in adapting to different academic environments. By recording the narratives of such learners, the LITP makes an important empirical contribution through the collection and analysis of valuable new data that augments the existing corpus in this field. Methodologically, the LITP contributes to the tradition of narrative studies, and does so both by collecting data through the participants’ own words and by presenting the findings through innovative composite profiles demonstrating the range of learners within one educational setting. Finally, the study makes a key conceptual contribution by charting the development and use of the
MERITS Plus model, which adds to the existing theoretical understanding of academic transition and learner identity and which is transferable to any educational setting.

**Rationale for the study**

As part of a professional doctorate, the LITP is located within a particular educational context. Data was collected at NCFE, which has an intake of around 3500 students aged 16-19 each year as well as adult learners. The college is situated in a large town, and attracts students from a surrounding area of around eight miles in which a number of other school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and FE colleges operate. This town is one of the more affluent towns in the region, although there are areas of significant deprivation within the borough and NCFE’s population includes students from a variety of backgrounds. NCFE was last inspected by Ofsted in 2007 and was awarded a grade of “outstanding”. The college was praised for “consistently high and improving success rates across all levels for learners aged 16-18”, and for creating an environment where “learners are set challenging targets and a significant proportion meets them successfully” (Ofsted: 2007, p.6).

NCFE offers a range of programmes, with a breadth of provision that makes it an appropriate site for the study. The two options for level three learners aged 16-19, A-Levels and BTECs, are kept separate from one another, despite sharing a number of college facilities such as the library. A learner interested in finding out about both pathways would, for example, require separate interviews with different members of staff rather than one discussion covering a range of options. In addition to the sense of division in the college structure, anecdotal evidence from students during my career suggests the separation of these two academic pathways begins during secondary school, and that the perceived value of particular qualifications is embedded much earlier in the schooling system than Year 11, when 16-19 choices must be made. Learners must also undergo a physical as well as academic transition
by moving from school to a different educational institution, and in my professional experience I have seen many who have not only coped but flourished as a result of the move as well as those who fail to adapt to their new surroundings and often leave early as a result. Those who drop out or underperform are interviewed by the college to find out the reasons for this; no such system exists for those who are doing well and appear to have successfully managed the transition process.

The knowledge and experience I have gathered as a member of staff allows me to work within the tradition of insider research by taking an ethnographic approach with my chosen case study. Whilst my professional immersion in NCFE requires a carefully reflexive approach that is detailed further in Chapter Five, the fact that I have an established role in the setting (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) has allowed systematic research into this particular institution by building on both my existing knowledge and my relationship with the college. The LITP is not only prompted by my own professional knowledge and experience however, but also through my EdD studies, which have allowed me to move from professional issues and hunches to primary research through the completion of three pilot research papers prior to the main fieldwork. This structure has allowed me to develop my ideas and methodologies by drawing upon these papers, which piloted an approach to the existing literatures on academic transition and learner identity, and different methodological approaches to data collection. Research Paper One (Gregory, 2012) presented a literature review relating to the A-Level and its use as a benchmark of academic standards. The first fieldwork (Gregory, 2013a) consisted of interviews with five A-Level students at NCFE in which they discussed their motivations for studying A-Levels, their expectations of the course, and the perceived reality of their experiences on the course. This study was crucial to the LITP methodologically, piloting the use of student interviews as a research method and making use of composite learner profiles as part of the process, inviting participants to consider these before the interview as a prompt to discussing their own experiences. I wrote these profiles based on my own professional
experience, whereas the LITP has allowed me to produce composite student profiles based directly on the participants’ own words. This paper also instigated the first version of the MERITS framework, with the sixth element (“Stories and Synthesis”) added during the third study (Gregory, 2013b), which piloted online questionnaires as a research method. The increased number of participants which this method permitted meant an additional element was needed to synthesise the different views that emerged. These pilot studies have been invaluable in arriving at my chosen research methods for the LITP, and in testing and refining the rigour and transferability of the theoretical model it presents.

The LITP has significance beyond the professional workplace however, and highlights a broader contemporary issue in education by considering the impact of recent changes in educational policy. In September 2015, new A-Level specifications were introduced, representing the biggest change in their structure and assessment since 2000. These changes are discussed in Chapter Two along with recent alterations to the assessment structure of BTECs, but it is pertinent to highlight how the original consultation documents on the reforms (Department for Education, 2014) interpret the purpose of following an A-Level programme:

The government is reforming GCSEs and A levels to ensure that they prepare students better for further and higher education, and employment…The new A levels will be linear qualifications that make sure that students develop the skills and knowledge needed for progression to undergraduate study (p.4).

Although employment is mentioned here, the remainder of the consultation paper makes it clear that “the primary purpose of A levels is to prepare students for degree-level study” (p.6), suggesting their content and structure are designed specifically as a stepping stone to level four undergraduate study rather than being useful to a learner wanting to go straight into a job – thus strengthening the separation between “academic” and “vocational” qualifications. Recent literature suggests that “entrenched views that academic routes are better” (NFER, 2014; unpaged) remain prevalent amongst learners and those who influence their academic
decisions, despite significant improvements to the structure and quality of vocational provision (NFER, 2014).

Another important change in the field of 16-19 education is the raising of the school leaving age. Learners born on or after 1 September 1997 must now stay in education or training until their 18th birthday, and although this may take the form of an apprenticeship or part-time training as well as full-time study at school or college, apprenticeships still account for a relatively low percentage of activity in this age range despite the Government’s target of three million apprenticeships across all age ranges by 2020 (Delebarre, 2015). Nevertheless, the need to attract and retain students on appropriate programmes becomes more important in a time of increased competition between educational providers, particularly since recruitment, achievement and retention all have an impact on funding. A review of post-16 provision across England was announced in July 2015 with the aim of encouraging institutions to merge to form larger colleges which would then provide “high quality professional and technical routes to employment, alongside robust academic routes” (DBIS/DfE, 2015; p.2). These area reviews affect all post-16 providers, but with substantial cuts to the national budget for the education and training of 16-19 year-olds and £250 million less available in 2014-15 than in 2013-14 (AoC, 2014), the FE sector has already undergone severe financial changes, with reports in the popular press suggesting that up to four in ten sixth form colleges and FE colleges could close as a result of funding cuts and the area reviews (eg Garner, 2015).

These policy changes in the field of 16-19 education prompt questions over how much choice learners have when deciding their academic futures, and raise the possibility that the illusion of choice is simply that – an illusion. The divide between academic and vocational qualifications and the proposed closing or merging of less financially-strong providers indicate that wider social processes are at work. The LITP helps further understanding of how patterns
of advantage and disadvantage may be reproduced through individual educational choices and how identity may be impacted by these social and political contexts, and does so through the use of a number of Bourdieu’s thinking tools (1977, 1986) as part of the MERITS Plus model. These tools – disposition, habitus, fields, games, capital, agency, structure and misrecognition – have allowed for consideration of the implications of the themes and patterns identified in the learner narratives, and a better understanding of how individual stories in one institution may illuminate broader issues about the perceived value of different forms of knowledge and education.

In looking at the issue of who controls and influences the educational choices of young people, the LITP highlights a topic that often features in the popular press but which is relatively under-researched, particularly in FE. The A-Level reforms were largely prompted by “concerns from higher education institutions that students lack some of the skills necessary for undergraduate success…the process for reform gives universities a greater role in the design and development of the new qualifications” (Department for Education, 2014; p.6-7). The MORI report commissioned by Ofqual that preceded the reform papers states the project undertook “three specific strands of qualitative research…with a variety of audiences” (MORI, 2012; p2); these “audiences” were representatives of the HE sector, A-Level teachers, and employers and representative employer bodies. Whilst it would be naïve to think that learners would have the overview and experience needed to reform specifications, it is noticeable that their views have not been taken into account in this consultation process: students appear to have been removed completely from the discussion over something that directly affects their future. The LITP addresses this silence by providing empirical data that specifically captures learner voice and adds to a corpus that is still under-represented in this respect, particularly in its discussion of how academic choices are presented to young people, and how they subsequently represent their experiences of transition.
Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into chapters, each explaining a different aspect of the study. Chapter Two locates the LITP within political and academic contexts by providing a brief history of 16-19 education, and considers how the sector has been affected by recent changes in government policy. This chapter also introduces the MERITS Plus model by explaining the different elements of the model and how its dimensions are demonstrated within the contexts outlined in the first part of the chapter. Chapters Three and Four look in more detail at the first five elements of the model by examining a range of literatures and discussing what is already known about each of the issues under consideration. Chapter Three examines motivations, expectations and realities, whilst Chapter Four presents the fourth and fifth elements of the model – identity and transition – as well as considering the potential of the sixth element, stories and synthesis, in understanding shared and distinctive dispositions.

Chapter Five presents the methodology adopted in the LITP by discussing the use of case studies, ethnography, and the design and implementation of the learner interviews and staff focus group. I outline the methods used to analyse the data, before offering a critical discussion of narratives as a method of data collection and of presenting findings. Chapter Six then presents a thematic analysis of the interview data through the use of the MERITS Plus model to identify themes in the learner narratives. This chapter presents the views of the participants, and raises a number of questions that are then addressed in Chapter Seven, which takes a more synoptic approach by drawing upon the interview data to consider the distinct cultures and practices of different academic pathways before presenting a range of composite learner profiles produced from the narratives. This chapter adopts a Bourdieusian approach, as well as a linguistic analysis of key words used by learners and the range of meanings these words appeared to have for different individuals. This chapter also presents the findings from a staff focus group discussing the composite profiles and their validity.
Chapter Eight looks at an important outcome of the LITP – the development of the MERITS Plus model as a way of understanding how learners prepare to access the field of 16-19 education, and how they espouse their identities and experiences of transition. The model is central to the LITP’s contribution to knowledge, and this chapter considers what it has revealed about the data through the use of a worked example for an individual learner. The study concludes in Chapter Nine by summarising the study’s key findings and their significance, as well as considering their implications for academic and research communities.
Chapter Two: Understanding the contexts and issues of academic transition through the MERITS Plus Model

Introduction

This chapter explains why academic transition matters by looking at the contexts within which it takes place, and argues there is a game in play in the field of 16-19 education, where some qualifications are perceived as being worth more than others. This game is historically located, with struggles over time regarding the status of knowledge and qualifications. This tension over investment of capital in the accreditation of differing qualifications means that academic choices are politicised, a situation that has evolved over time and which is outlined in this chapter. Whilst opportunities for learners to exercise individual agency over academic choices are limited during the compulsory stages of education, the post-16 sector has, until recently, marked the end of compulsory education; learners could choose which qualifications they wished to undertake – if any – and drop out without legal consequence if unhappy with their choice. However, the raising of the school leaving age means that learners aged 16-19 now form a category of their own and the term "post-16 education" has become largely meaningless, with all learners in England now required to continue in some form of education or training until the age of 18 rather than being allowed to leave education at 16 as previously. Thus, whilst post-16 education is still widely thought of as post-compulsory, this is no longer the case: learners aged 16-19 have more freedom of academic choice than in compulsory schooling but these choices are, in practice, restricted by the power processes at work. As well as locating the LITP within educational and political contexts, this chapter introduces the MERITS Plus model, a conceptual framework to help understand and contextualise the relationship between academic choices (and the individual agency implied by this process), transition, and learner identity. Thus, while the first half of this chapter identifies the range of 16-19 learners in full-time education, where and what they can study and why they may be doing so, this is done
through the lens of Bourdieu’s thinking tools. These contexts demonstrate the dimensions of
the MERITS Plus model that is introduced in the second half of the chapter.

Educational Contexts

The LITP focuses on learners in England aged 16-19 studying at level three. The four home
nations of the UK each has its own education system, although England does not have
devolved powers and so education in England is run by the UK government. Table 2.1 below
summarises the main qualifications available at each level in England, Wales and Northern
Ireland (Scotland operates under its own system) under The National Qualifications

Table 2.1: Levels of Academic Qualification in England, Wales and N. Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Sample Qualifications Available</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry level</td>
<td>Entry level certificates (in English, Maths or Science, for example)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Level 1 certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BTEC Introductory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>GCSEs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level 2 certificates and diplomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BTEC Firsts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>A-Levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BTEC National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Baccalaureate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to Higher Education courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 (Certificate)</td>
<td>Level 4 certificates and diplomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1 of most Batchelor’s degree courses is taught at this level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5 (Intermediate)</td>
<td>Level 5 certificates and diplomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BTEC Higher Nationals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 2 of most Batchelor’s degree courses is taught at this level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6 (Honours)</td>
<td>Final year of Batchelor’s degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level 6 certificates and diplomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>Master’s degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postgraduate certificates and diplomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level 7 advanced professional certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Doctoral degrees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each level is a qualification in its own right, as well as preparing learners for study at the
following level should they elect to continue with their education. For that reason, a learner
must successfully complete a level before moving to the next, although academic providers are responsible for setting their own entry requirements, suggesting there is not necessarily a consistent measure of success across these qualifications. For example, if a learner wishes to study A-Levels at NCFE, current entry requirements state they must achieve a minimum of two grade Bs and four grade Cs at GCSE (Northlands College, 2016a), whilst other providers offering this course may have higher or lower entry requirements. Similarly, study at level four – most commonly undertaken by entering a degree programme at a university – may in theory be accessed through completion of any of the level three qualifications listed above, but in practice a particular institution may decide to set entry requirements as, for example, three A grades at A Level for particular courses. This perception of certain qualifications as being more desirable than others suggests that a particular game is in play in the field of 16-19 education, where academic choices carry far greater significance than a simple decision based on personal preferences.

An understanding of Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital can help make sense of why different values are attached to different qualifications, and by whom. Cultural capital – “which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and which may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications” (Bourdieu, 1986; p.47) – suggests that educational fields are not level playing surfaces, particularly since it is capital that makes “the games of society…something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle” (Bourdieu, 1986; p.46). For the respondents in the LITP entering the field of 16-19 education, the odds of academic recognition may be automatically limited or enhanced by the choice of a particular “game” (or educational pathway) conferring a particular kind of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) identified that cultural capital could exist in three forms: “in the embodied state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods…and in the institutionalised state” (Bourdieu, 1986; p.47). The first of these suggests that habitus is revealed through practice, whilst the
second indicates that objectified cultural capital acquires its own value that may be valid at any one time – a value created previously, by earlier social agents. Gregory (2012) found that A-Levels were still recognised as being the gold standard (Snapper, 2007) amongst level three qualifications in a range of literatures and discourses, including the popular press, government documentation and academic journals, suggesting this choice carries a higher value in terms of the cultural capital it can confer and – potentially – a recognition that those entering this pathway already possess more cultural capital as a result of their academic success at school. However, the objectified nature of this form of cultural capital means that values are not fixed, and instead are modified as cultural tastes adapt and change, again offering the potential for a shift in any given field.

The third form of capital cited here, the “institutionalised state”, encompasses those consolidated social groups which influence how individual agents are able to attempt this process of modification, and – of particular interest to this study – includes educational institutions. Whilst an individual can, in theory, use objectified cultural capital as a means of changing their embodied capital, this may in practice be limited by the value systems prescribed by the education system itself and embodied by the institutions at which an individual can pursue their academic options. The awarding of particular qualifications – “a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture” (Bourdieu, 1986; p.50) – can be seen in two ways: as a method of differentiating between individuals and their relative skills and achievements, or as an actual construction of differences between competing value systems. Thus, by recognising the value of a particular qualification over another (as, for example, in the case of universities who will only accept A-Levels as an appropriate entry requirement), “one sees clearly the performative magic of the power of instituting, the power to show forth and secure belief or, in a word, to impose recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986; p.51).
With this in mind, I now discuss the options available to learners studying at level three, and the locations where these are available.

**Level Three Qualifications Available for 16-19s**

As already established, not all learners in this age bracket will study a level three qualification as schools and colleges have entry requirements that must be met before this level of qualification can be selected (such as, for example, a certain number of GCSE or equivalent passes). If the learner achieves these entry requirements they can follow an A-Level programme or a single-subject vocational course which, in most cases, will be a BTEC.

**A-Levels**

A-Levels (short for Advanced Levels) were introduced in the UK in 1951 and are described as “qualifications [which] focus on traditional study skills…They are highly valued by schools, colleges and employers” (Directgov, undated; unpaged). A-Levels were designed to allow students to focus on fewer subjects and thus develop deeper understanding in their chosen areas, and replaced the Higher School Certificate, which required learners to study a wider range of subjects. Most students studied three individual A-Level subjects across a period of two years, with externally assessed examinations at the end of the two-year period as well as externally moderated coursework.

Two significant structural changes in the way the A-Level is assessed have taken place during the qualification’s history: Curriculum 2000 (DfE, 2000) and the return to a linear structure (DfE, 2014). The Curriculum 2000 reforms introduced a modular system in which students sat externally assessed examinations at the end of their first year of study and were
awarded an Advanced Subsidiary (AS-Level) qualification in each subject if successful – a qualification worth half of the full A-Level. This marked an attempt to add greater breadth to A-Level programmes by allowing students to take an additional fourth subject in their first year and thereby leave school or college with three full A-Levels and one AS-Level. However, year-on-year increases in the pass rate (Gregory, 2012) led to criticism that A-Levels had become too easy, as students could re-sit modules in order to improve their grades, and the standard required at AS was lower than that required at A2 (the second year of study) despite being worth the same number of marks. From September 2015, A-Levels reverted to their original linear structure, with only the synoptic examinations at the end of the second year counting towards the overall grade and a reduction in the amount of non-examined assessment modules such as coursework on the basis “that assessment should be by exam only, except where non-exam assessment is needed to test a skill essential to the subject” (Ofqual, 2014; p.7). This report suggests that a “resit culture” had arisen from, meaning that “students are not properly prepared for their next steps in education or work, where they are often expected to do their best at the first opportunity” (Ofqual, 2014; p4), suggesting a clear agenda to preserve high academic standards within this particular educational pathway.

**BTECs**

BTECs (short for Business and Technology Education Council, who first ran the award) were introduced in 1984, and differ from A-Levels in a number of ways. They may be studied at a range of levels, from the pre-GCSE level 1 up to degree level, and are specifically designed to be “vocational” – in other words, relating to the needs of the workplace and of the learner’s future employer. They are continually assessed through coursework and practical tasks, and may involve the need to pass a work placement element, although recent changes (DfE, 2014) mean some courses are partly assessed via external examination. Despite the vocational element to this pathway, an increasing number of learners are using a
level 3 BTEC as a route to obtaining a place on an undergraduate course; at NCFE a higher percentage of learners have gone on to university in the last three years with a BTEC than with A-Levels (Northlands College: 2014, 2015, 2016b).

This trend within NCFE is reflected elsewhere, with recent university admissions figures indicating that universities are accepting an increasing number of students with a BTEC or other vocational qualification rather than the more traditional A-Level passes. In a report for *Times Higher Education* based on data supplied by UCAS, the university admissions system, Grove (2015) notes that in the six years from 2008 to 2014, many universities increased their BTEC numbers “almost threefold”, with “about 85,000 BTEC holders…placed in large providers in 2014, up from 44,000 in 2008” whilst “the number of students holding A levels stay[ed] broadly static between 2008 and 2014” (unpaged). The number of students admitted with A-Levels remains higher (around 270,000 each year) and the data does not indicate what types of courses these students applied for, but it seems a change in attitudes is occurring both amongst learners and universities about the suitability of a vocational qualification as preparation for study at level four and beyond in a university environment.

*Types of Provider*

The LITP is located within the field of 16-19 education, a field metaphorically encompassing a wide range of cultural practice across different institutions, each with their own particular values, structures and conventions. Not only are there different institutions in this field – school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, FE colleges – but different academic pathways are available, and thus learners must determine not only what capital is valued in this field but also how this capital is distributed. There are several options available to learners aged 16-19 on level three programmes in terms of where they study, although in practice the range of choices available may be limited by the route they have elected to take. School sixth forms
and Sixth Form Colleges tend to offer a narrower provision to their learners (generally just A-Levels or, in some cases, the International Baccalaureate) whilst FE colleges offer a broader choice of programmes. This division appears to be largely historical; the term “further education” is a neutral term referring to “any study after secondary education that’s not part of higher education (that is, not taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree)” (Gov.UK, 2014; unpaged). However, other definitions indicate a separation of different institutions, with – for example – the British Council summarising Sixth Form colleges as “specialis[ing] in academic courses to prepare students for higher education” and further education colleges as “offer[ing] courses and qualifications in a wide range of vocational and academic subjects at many levels” (EducationUK.org; undated, unpaged). This division between Sixth Form Colleges (particularly those attached to schools) and FE institutions threatened to widen further with current Prime Minster Theresa May’s (2016) stated intention to remove the ban on new grammar schools that had been in place since 1998, although these plans have now been paused as discussed further in the section that follows.

The Current Position of 16-19 Education in England

This section provides a brief history of post-16 education in England as it relates to learners aged 16-19. As noted above, the struggle in this field has shifted over time, and continues to do so as successive governments implement policies promoting differing educational values. Whilst the growing popularity of vocational qualifications as a route into HE appears to have interrupted the predominance of the A-Level pathway, an education system in which transition is so deeply rooted in examination success continues to promote the desirability of a more academic identity above any other. The section that follows raises questions over whose interests education policies are actually designed to serve, and considers the impact of policy rhetoric and language in forming social attitudes towards particular educational standpoints and positions.
Past Government Policy on Post-16 Education and the current position of 16-19 education

The field of 16-19 education is not autonomous, and is subject to heteronomous forces which raise questions over both the purpose and value of different academic choices. Education is often the focus of political campaigns, and must comply with external standards and priorities rather than, for instance, encouraging the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (although this of course remains the personal goal of many educators). Table 2.2 below summarises some of the key legislation, policy texts and political statements that have impacted upon learners, particularly those aged 16-19, in England. The legislation listed here is that most relevant to the LITP, and thus focuses primarily on two areas: the impact of policy in creating and maintaining a divided schooling system, and the increasing marketisation of education.

Table 2.2: Key Legislation and Policy Relating to 16-19 Education in England and its Wider Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description and significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Education Act (1944) establishes three different types of secondary school (post-11 education), including technical schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>A-Levels introduced in England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>BTECs introduced in England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1988</td>
<td>Education Reform Act (DfES, 1988) introduces the National Curriculum, standardising all subjects in schools across key stages 1-4, and allows parents to specify their preferred choice of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Review of vocational education (Wolf, 2011) published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>National programme of post-16 area reviews begin (DfE, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2015</td>
<td>Prime Minister David Cameron announces plan to turn every school in England into an Academy (Cameron, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 2015</td>
<td>School leaving age raised to 18 (as passed in The Education and Skills Act 2008; DfES, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 2015</td>
<td>A-Levels revert to original linear structure (DfE, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 2016</td>
<td>Some modules of revised BTECs in certain subjects now assessed via external examination (DfE, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 2016</td>
<td>Prime Minister Theresa May announces her intention to end the ban on the formation of new grammar schools (May, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2017</td>
<td>Plan to end the ban on new grammar schools abandoned in new Conservative legislation (House of Lords, 2017)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss all the educational reforms pertaining to the 16-19 sector, but it is relevant to outline one of the most important reports of recent years as an example of the political contexts within which schools and colleges must operate. In 2003 a working party was formed in response to concerns over manipulation of A-Level grades by examining boards. In the subsequent report, Tomlinson (2004) recommended – amongst other proposals – that both A-Levels and vocational courses be reformed under one overarching qualifications framework and no longer be available as separate entities but as components of the new system, following earlier concerns in the consultation document that “for too long, vocational studies and qualifications have been undervalued” (DfES, 2002; p.4). Despite this core recommendation, the subsequent White Paper on 14 - 19 Education and Skills (DfES, 2005) rejected this element of the report, along with the recommendation that the emphasis on external examination be replaced by greater internal assessment. The rejection of two key proposals suggests the pre-election political climate was not conducive to such far-reaching amendments to the education system, particularly in the face of some negative press coverage of the suggested reforms and some staunch defence of the A-Level (Gregory, 2012). Instead, the White Paper (DfES, 2005) proposed to “keep both GCSEs and A levels, but improve both in those areas” (p. 9) and run them alongside a new system of diplomas with “natural progression routes both through the levels of the Diploma and between GCSEs and A levels and the different levels of the Diploma” in order to “secure for all teenagers routes that avoid early narrowing down, but provide real choice of what to learn and in what setting” (p.9). That these diplomas failed to get off the ground while today’s learners remain distinctly narrowed down in their choices suggests that, despite the assertion that “the status quo is not an option” (Tomlinson, 2004; p.2), the status quo is still very much in place, and that some form of action is needed to prompt “disruption of the policy cycle that perpetuates the existing vocational/academic divide” (Chankseliani et al, 2016; p.597).
To a certain extent, this divide has been in place since the 1944 Education Act introduced a tripartite system in post-11 education by establishing three different types of secondary school, including technical schools offering a curriculum geared towards the workplace. Whilst in practice few of these were ever built, the divide between academic and vocational provision had been established, and the association between vocational qualifications and lower-income students from working-class and disadvantaged backgrounds has continued to the present day (Crawford et al, 2011). Adding to this is the existence of different providers of academic and vocational qualifications. NCFE offers both BTECs and A-Levels, but this is not the case for all institutions, with the majority of sixth form colleges and school sixth forms offering A-Level programmes only. This is reflected in the number of students on particular courses: statistically, vocational qualifications have been less popular with learners in the UK than A-Levels, with the most recent data available showing that 36% of level three learners had elected to study a vocational course (European Commission, 2011). Much can change in six years though, and NCFE, for one, has seen a substantial increase in the popularity of the BTEC amongst those applying for level three study (Northlands College, 2016c). Despite this, pilot studies conducted for the LITP indicate the divide between A-Levels and vocational qualifications remains (Gregory, 2012; Gregory 2012a; Gregory 2012b). Thus, one of the interests of this study is to look at the rhetoric of choice employed during the transition from secondary to tertiary education, by considering how the available options are presented and how much agency learners are able to exercise in this choice – in other words, who is actually doing the choosing. Wolf (2011) found that too many young people were being failed by the education system, particularly those undertaking vocational qualifications, and recommended that “16-19 year old students pursuing full time courses of study should not follow a programme which is entirely ‘occupational’” and should instead be guided towards a course “which offers clear potential for progression either in education or into skilled employment” (Wolf, 2011; p.15), thereby raising serious questions both about the nature of advice given in schools and the quality of some of the courses available to learners in this age group.
As well as changes in the field of 16-19 education, it is important to consider wider educational contexts. No section of an individual’s education exists in isolation, as each transition from one stage to the next carries previous academic experiences encapsulated within the habitus. Thus it is pertinent to consider the educational values embedded during compulsory schooling as well as those to be carried forward to university through an understanding of the impact of reform and restructuring to post-compulsory provision in terms of markets, choice and competition.

It is beyond the scope of the LITP to examine in detail the marketisation that has taken place in education since the Thatcher governments from 1979, but it is relevant to briefly consider how this process has affected different sectors of education, and the impact this may have on learner identity. The gradual raising of the cap on university fees, with many institutions charging £9,000 per annum, and the greater emphasis on funding through repayable loans (rather than grants) has meant some learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have been discouraged from applying, particularly as universities such as Oxford and Cambridge and members of the Russell Group set entry grades at a level designed to maintain their elite status. At the same time, the increase in university places and the popularity of UK universities with overseas students has resulted in the “massification (increase in student numbers) and diversification of the student body (participation by different group identities)” (Morgan, 2013; p.10).

The picture is similarly contradictory for learners in compulsory education. The education system in England has been increasingly deregulated in recent years; according to the general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, “No other advanced economy has deregulated education to the extent that the government has cut loose schools in England”
Courtney (2015) traces this process back to the 1988 Education Reform Act, which “was significant regarding the market processes for which it legislated and the desirability of future market solutions that it facilitated, establishing the discursive dominance of neoliberalism” (unpaged) and is exemplified in the Academies Programme. The growth of academies – schools funded directly by the government rather than through local councils and with more freedom in elements such as curriculum and admissions – has continued apace in recent years, with 2,075 of 3,381 secondary schools in the UK operating as academies (BBC, 2016; unpaged). These were originally conceived as a replacement for underperforming secondary schools as they offered more scope for academy staff to make improvements, but their position has since become less clear. Rayner (2017) identifies that recent reforms, such as the Academies Programme, “have been discursively constructed as a means, not just of improving the quality of education, but also of doing social justice work” (p.27), but notes that attempting to tackle two objectives with one policy strategy is problematic. Plans to turn every school in England into an academy announced by David Cameron’s Conservative government in 2015 have since been scrapped, with his replacement, Theresa May, announcing her intention to end the ban on the formation of new grammar schools (May, 2016). No such schools had been permitted since 1998 due to their selective admissions policy, but May stated her aim to remove this ban and be “unapologetic for our belief in social mobility and making this country a meritocracy” (May, 2016; unpaged). Despite pledges to improve the percentage of children from disadvantaged backgrounds able to access grammar school places, it is worth noting that the level of pupils on free school meals in grammar schools is around one-fifth the level of non-selective schools in comparable local areas (Bolton, 2017). Although the plan to lift the ban on new grammar schools has now been removed from proposed legislation (House of Lords, 2017), these discrepancies send out a message that some education is more valuable than others – a value potentially embedded at an early age and continued throughout an individual’s academic journey.
A school system offering different qualifications conferring varying levels of capital has the potential to create conflict within the field of 16-19 education. Bourdieu defined a field as “an autonomous universe, a kind of arena in which people play a game which has certain rules, rules which are different from those of the game that is played in the adjacent space” (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991; p.215). The presence of these rules has led to the concept of field being utilised to examine inequalities in the education system, such as in Bathmaker’s (2015) discussion of HE admissions practices, which concludes this process – or “game”, with its “taken-for-granted rules” – controls which students can gain access to which parts of the HE field. This is an increasingly diverse field, and contests and conflicts arise when the existing rules “come up against an alternative set of taken-for-granted practices imported from the FE field, with rules that operate differently” (Bathmaker, 2015; p.72). At an FE setting such as NCFE, those playing the A-Level game and those playing the vocational game exist within the same physical arena rather than an adjacent, metaphorical, space. To complicate the field further, “the people who are involved in the game have, as such, specific interests, interests which are not defined by their mandators” (Bourdieu and Thompson, 1991; p.215); in other words, individuals playing particular games can make a bid for recognition in support of their own interests, even if these bids run counter to the status quo – or orthodoxy – that currently dominates the field. Thus, whilst the status quo may recognise an A-Level pathway as conferring a higher amount of cultural capital through its perceived suitability as an academic qualification leading to higher study, a competing heterodoxy may challenge these beliefs. In this way, institutions – in this case, educational providers – can be seen as instruments by which individuals and groups can promote their own form of capital and thus challenge the status quo; as already noted above, values are not fixed, and may be modified by social agents. One way in which an orthodoxy may attempt to maintain the status quo is through the use of discourse – forms of language which express and promote particular beliefs and values. This will be discussed further in the linguistic analysis of the learner narratives that forms Chapter 7, where I consider the forms
of language used by the participants and how students on different pathways narrate their experiences.

Use of the MERITS Plus model to understand academic transition

Summary of the model

The first half of this chapter has established the contexts within which participants in the LITP are operating, and suggested there is a game in play in the field of 16-19 education with different opportunities to stake capitals around learning, knowledge and qualifications. This generates some important issues affecting students and how their academic choices are made. These are largely issues of choice and of academic currency, and the LITP is interested in how students are negotiating the tensions between the power structures in place and their own individual choices. I now introduce the MERITS Plus model, a conceptual framework to help understand the power processes at work in the field of 16-19 education and how these may impact upon the choices and experiences of individual learners. The development of this framework is detailed in Appendix 5, but Table 2.3 below summarises the model as it stood at the end of RP3 (Gregory, 2013b), and the main questions considered under each of the first six elements of the framework.
Table 2.3: Outline of the MERITS Model Framework after the pilot studies (see Appendix 6 for BTEC version)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations</th>
<th>Why does an individual choose to study A-Levels [the pilot studies involved only A-Level students] rather than follow other academic pathways or apply for work or apprenticeships? What do they perceive to be the value of such a choice? Are these motivations largely extrinsic or intrinsic, or a combination of the two?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>What preconceived ideas (if any) might an individual hold before starting an A-Level programme of study? Where do these come from? How do they expect A-Level lesson content and delivery to differ from GCSE classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>How does the programme match up to these expectations in actuality? Has the shift from GCSE to A-Level been challenging in terms of pedagogical changes? Do students think that GCSEs have adequately prepared them for the rigours of studying a level 3 qualification?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>How do A-Level students describe themselves? Is there any commonality in how individual students describe themselves, suggesting a collective identity amongst different groups of learners? Do they perceive that their identity may have changed since becoming an A-Level student, and if so, in what way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>How effectively do A-Level students feel that a/ GCSEs have prepared them for study at A-Level, and b/ A-Levels are preparing them for study at Higher Education? What examples can they provide of skills they have developed through the process of moving from GCSE studies to A-Level?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories and Synthesis</td>
<td>How do individual students bring together these feelings and experiences in order to narrate the story of their academic transition? Do they use similar words or phrases to suggest a commonality of experience and identity during the narration of these stories?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first five elements of the framework focus on aspects of individual learner experience, and the sixth – Stories and Synthesis – then allows these individual stories to be assimilated,
and for the consideration of the possible existence of collective identities and recognisable learner types. Finally, the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools as a theoretical lens added during the current study brings a dynamic to the model by recognising the complexity of the data under discussion, and allows individual learner experiences to be considered in relation to the wider contexts and power structures in place. Ideas of disposition and habitus, fields, games and capital, and agency, structure and misrecognition were used to examine the issues raised by the thematic and linguistic analyses and to locate the data within particular contexts. Some of these notions, including capital, games and fields, have already been raised in this chapter, and the remaining are discussed in the two chapters that follow, specifically in how they illuminate understanding of learner motivations, expectations, perceptions of reality, identity and transition.

Despite the importance of each of the first six elements of the MERITS framework in helping to address my research aims, they are not given equal prominence in this thesis. The first three – motivations, expectations and reality – are discussed in Chapter Three, whilst the next two – identity and transition – are given a more detailed focus in Chapter Four and stories and synthesis is not fully dealt with as a separate element. This is a deliberate decision: the main focus of the LITP is the relationship between academic transition and learner identity, and thus these elements are given greater weighting whilst motivations, expectations and reality are examined as a way of illuminating aspects of that relationship. Stories and synthesis is viewed as an overarching component rather than a separate element, allowing individual student narratives to be brought together to reveal patterns throughout the data, and as such is considered in detail during the thematic and linguistic analysis. I now briefly outline the first six elements of the model and the issues they address, as well as how use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools may help illuminate each one.
Motivations

The first element considers the reasons a learner might choose to study a particular academic pathway by inviting participants to espouse what they perceive to be the value of such a choice and the factors which have impacted upon their decision, and thus addresses the LITP’s first research question: what factors do learners identify as having impacted on their academic choices in deciding to study either A-Levels or a BTEC as a level three programme of study? This element therefore examines issues of choice in terms of how much agency learners can exert when making decisions, and the existence of differing levels of capital attached to different qualifications.

Expectations

This element asks participants to discuss what preconceived ideas (if any) they held before starting their programme of study, and where these had come from. In so doing, it addresses the study’s second research question: what ideas and attitudes do learners hold about their chosen qualification on entering the programme, and where have these come from? The “expectations” element builds on the preceding “motivations” element in considering existing discourses around particular educational pathways and providers, in terms of the perceived value of different qualifications and how and by whom these discourses are conveyed to learners making their academic choices.

Reality

The third element follows on from the second in asking learners to discuss how their experiences of their chosen programme match up – or otherwise - to their expectations. This allows participants the scope to construct their own version of reality by identifying what has been important to them in the transition process, as well as helping the study to illuminate
potential mismatches in the information provided to learners when making academic choices which may lead to the misrecognition of particular credentials. The third of the LITP’s research questions is addressed by this element, as well as the two (identity and transition) which follow in considering, what is the impact of policy and other existing discourses upon the culture and practice of studying a particular programme, and what effect does this have on learner identities?

Identity

This element of the model is interested in how students describe themselves, both as a learner on a particular pathway and as an individual experiencing academic transition. Thus this element considers whether there is any commonality in how individual students describe themselves, suggesting a collective identity amongst different groups of learners, as well as asking participants whether they perceive their identity to have changed since the transition to level three study at NCFE. The inclusion of this element allows the study to examine ideas and issues around identity; these are discussed in detail in Chapter Four, but include the fluid and dialogic nature of identity as well as ideas around collective identity and social identity theory and the relationship between agency and structure.

Transition

The fifth element of the model has been included to capture learners at a particular moment in time, and thus follows on from the fourth: if, as suggested above, identity is fluid and dialogic, then in a non-longitudinal study such as the LITP it is important to define at which point in the schooling system the participants are located. The inclusion of this element allows the study to examine the effect – if any – of academic transition upon learner identity, by giving participants the scope to identify what they perceive to be the key changes, both pedagogical and social, involved in the transition process.
Stories and Synthesis

This element helps to address the LITP’s final research question - how do students on different academic programmes narrate their educational experiences, and is a sense of collective identity evident amongst different cohorts? The synthesis of the preceding five elements of the model produces the story of each individual learner, which can then be compared with other participants within the study. This element of the model therefore brings together the individual feelings and experiences espoused by the participants in order to narrate the story of their academic transition by looking for common themes across the narratives as well as similar words or phrases which may suggest a commonality of experience and identity. “Stories and Synthesis” was added during pilot fieldwork, but its potential was not fully realised until the current study, as detailed in Chapter Eight.

Use of theory in understanding transition

As the LITP has collected and analysed narratives on experiences of transition, the MERITS Plus model fits within the tradition of transition pedagogy in using a theoretical model to better understand the process. Some of the most influential work in the field of transition pedagogy is discussed in Chapter Four, particularly in terms of how theoretical frameworks may be developed and utilised in the study of transition and its impact on learner identity as the student moves to the next stage of their academic journey. The use of such frameworks allows for transparency between the existing theories in the field and the approach taken to collecting, analysing and presenting data; Polit and Tatano Beck (2004) suggest the use of a tangible structure can render findings both more meaningful and more accessible, and whilst their comments relate to the field of nursing, this principle can be claimed in any field where research aims to be of use to others. Other key research considered in Chapter Four includes Kift’s (2005, 2009) use of six key principles - transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring – in designing first year
undergraduate curricula, and the framework proposed by Whannell and Whannell (2015), based on identity theory and examining the interaction between emotional commitment, university student identity, and university student role.

More pertinently for this study, Bourdieu’s thinking tools have also been used to examine the process of transition, such as in the work of Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) in dual sector institutions delivering both further and higher education. Their framework takes a slightly different approach from those mentioned above; rather than focus solely on the institution (as in Kift) or the learner (as in Whannell and Whannell), their model is based on three different but interrelated levels of transition: “institutions in transition; transitions in institutions; and students’ experiences of transitions” (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009), and concludes through use of field, habitus and capital that both individuals and institutions going through transition in a stratified HE market must define their place in that market through a process of positioning. Whilst this study – like many others looking at transition – focuses on HE, the use of this model combined with Bourdieu’s thinking tools to examine the construction of a place or position within a particular field is of much interest to my own work. The MERITS Plus model developed during the LITP aims to address the gap in this tradition of theoretical frameworks by examining the impact of transition upon learner identity in a FE setting through a similar approach, combining a conceptual framework with a further consideration of data through the lens of Bourdieu.

This chapter has summarised the key academic contexts within which learners – particularly those aged 16-19 – must operate in the English education system, and identified why this is an area worthy of research. Learners in this field have been subject to significant changes in recent years, and thus an understanding of how individuals may experience and negotiate the transition into FE is crucial in providing learners with the support mechanisms they
require. I have also introduced the MERITS Plus model as a means of conceptualising the complex relationship between academic choices, transition and learner identity. In the two chapters that follow, I consider each of the first five elements of this model in more detail, as well as how issues and existing knowledge in each of these areas may be viewed through the lens of Bourdieus’s thinking tools.
Chapter Three: Motivations, Expectations and Reality

Introduction

This chapter introduces and discusses the first three elements of the MERITS Plus framework by considering: learner motivations for making academic choices; their expectations of their chosen course; and their perceptions of the reality of studying this course in a new environment. An understanding of each of these is crucial if educational providers are to recruit and retain learners on appropriate pathways and thus not only maintain their own funding and performance but ensure students are likely to progress to their desired destinations. The first three sections of this chapter discuss what is already known about each of these issues and key ideas in the existing literatures. I outline how these elements of the model help address my research questions, and consider the use of Bourdieu's thinking tools to further understand the issues around learner motivation, expectations and reality. Finally, this chapter introduces how these elements of the model link to the next two, identity and transition, and how the individual narratives collected in this study will come together to produce the synthesised stories offered in the composite learner profiles which form part of the data presentation. As outlined in Chapter Two, whilst motivations, expectations and reality are important elements of this model in their own right by helping address the study’s first three research questions, I have included them in the model as a way of beginning to understand the impact of transition upon learner identity. Thus there is a great deal of interrelation between the first five elements despite their presentation here as separate entities, and in how they come together to form the sixth, synoptic element. This is addressed at the end of the chapter, where I discuss the links between the different elements and their role in illuminating each consecutive section of the model before going on to address identity and transition in more detail in Chapter Four.
Motivations

“Motivation” is a widely-used term encompassing more than one meaning. For example, Gorard et al (2012) use it to refer to “both the reason why an individual makes a decision, and their strength of purpose in carrying these decisions out” (p.14). I have used the term solely to consider a learner’s reasons for choosing to follow either an A-Level or a BTEC pathway, as all the participants in the study had already carried out the decision they had made (although they had, in some cases, changed this decision, and offered discussion both of their initial decision and the reasons behind changing course). Within this definition, it is recognised that learners may be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, with the former defined as “motivation that is animated by personal enjoyment, interest, or pleasure” and the latter as “governed by reinforcement contingencies” (Lai, 2001; p.4); in other words, the perceived external consequences of the choice. This is not a behavioural or psychological study, and thus it is beyond its scope to consider these distinctions separately and in detail. However, the range of motivations expressed during the learner responses to this section of the interviews, and whether these appeared to be intrinsic or extrinsic, is considered further in Chapter Six.

This element of the model is crucial in addressing the first of my research questions: What factors do learners identify as having impacted on their academic choices in deciding to study either A-Levels or a BTEC as a level three programme of study? It is therefore imperative to consider why this matters. As outlined in Chapter Two, A-Level and BTEC pathways are both now two-year linear courses, and thus a learner’s reasons for choosing how to spend such a substantial proportion of their schooling become more significant. Additionally, from a funding point of view, it is vital for colleges to recruit and retain appropriate students and that these learners then achieve on their chosen course, as success rates – against which colleges are measured - will be adversely affected if a course is failed or if the student does not complete their studies. As such, providers must
understand learner motivations and ensure, as far as possible, that students are on the course which is best suited to their goals.

Much of the existing literatures on learner motivations are concerned with particular groups of learners (such as working-class students or ethnic minorities) accessing HE (and in particular, elite universities). This in turn can be separated into two issues: learners’ failure to achieve the appropriate grades, and a lack of ambition to access HE even if the correct grades are achieved. According to UCAS (2015), students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are nearly two and half times less likely to apply to university than students from less disadvantaged backgrounds even when the necessary grades are achievable, a gap which widens when looking at applications to the Russell Group Universities. The most advantaged 20% of school leavers are 6.3 times more likely to apply to the universities with the highest entry grades than the most disadvantaged 40% (OFFA, 2016). This has been recognised by recent government policy aiming to double the percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university by 2020 (BIS, 2015); thus it is important to understand the complex decision-making processes that students undergo, and how these may be related to previous educational experiences.

The issues affecting learner motivations for academic choices at 16 are different from those faced in HE. This stage of education is no longer post-compulsory since the raising of the school leaving age to 18, meaning leaving education at 16 is no longer an option. As noted in the previous chapter, however, learner agency is restricted both by the limited options available to 16-19s, and through policy and popular discourses which present different qualifications as carrying differing levels of capital. This highlights the importance of considering what advice and information is available to school-age learners in making their decisions, and the level of autonomy they can exercise.
The use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools allows understanding of these issues within this context. If qualifications are perceived to carry differing levels of capital in the field of 16-19 education, this inequality has potential consequences for a learner’s ability to exert agency in selecting which to study upon leaving school, where they have developed a particular habitus. The notion of habitus is explored fully in the chapter that follows, but suggests that certain habits and dispositions can become part of an individual’s identity due to previous experiences and the forms of capital already possessed. This may affect learner motivations for choosing the academic pathway to which they feel they are best suited and thus limit true agency. In this way, use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools (1977, 1986, 2004) indicates that inequalities in social mobility can be explained through ideas of cultural reproduction: those with lower access to the right forms of capital are disadvantaged, as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend underperforming schools and come from families with little or no experience of HE. Meanwhile, students with access to the “right types” of capital are more likely to attend better performing schools – those which achieve higher examination results and where the staff have more experience of supporting students who aspire to HE. These patterns of advantage and disadvantage are echoed in the work of Bernstein (1971), which suggests that students from different backgrounds also possess different vocabularies; middle class families are more conversant in the types of discourse used to educate, and thus students who have grown up in such households are at an advantage within the schooling system.

Whilst the LITP does not focus on socio-economic factors, it may be that patterns of reproduction are still visible, with students who have excelled in an examination-based schooling system identified as more suitable to partake in such discourses at college. Atkins (2016) explores the motivations of young people undertaking vocational qualifications, and finds that whilst serendipity is a key factor in chancing upon particular academic opportunities, “subtle social class fractions or particular social positioning is significant in its
relationship to decision making, the way in which young people perceive and construct their careers, the pathways and trajectories taken by them, and the way in which they exerted their agency through the decision-making process” (Atkins, 2016; unpaged). This is an important idea in the LITP, which is interested in issues of agency and choice, and the “ways in which the transitions of young people articulate with, and are influenced by, structures, systems and individuals” (Atkins, 2016; unpaged). In presenting the narratives of two different students who had elected to follow vocational qualifications, one at level two and one at level three, Atkins (2016) highlights the importance played in each learner’s decision by the type and amount of cultural capital held, particularly in terms of family influence, as well as each learner’s individual disposition and how they positioned themselves within particular fields pertaining to education and future career choices. The learner embarking on the level two programme had happened upon this opportunity purely by chance, having assumed that someone in his social position – unemployed and from a low socio-economic background – was unable to access any form of FE. Whilst this study draws heavily upon careership theories that are beyond the scope of the LITP, these findings are interesting in terms of the forces at work in the decisions of the two learners and how “horizons for action [may be] constrained” (Atkins, 2016; unpaged) by lack of embodied capital. These ideas are reflected in Evans (2016), which found that decision-making for a group of learners in Wales when transitioning from compulsory to post-compulsory education was shaped by inequalities in social class, with their choices heavily influenced by the economic landscape. Again, whilst the LITP does not focus on socio-economic factors, the influence of particular contexts and the embodiment of different forms of capital is of much interest.

Expectations

This element helps address the second of my four research questions: what ideas and attitudes do learners hold about their chosen qualification on entering the programme, and where have these come from? The term “expectations” has been consciously preferred to
“aspirations”. Gorard et al (2012) suggest that educational aspirations reflect hopes and desires, whereas expectations have a greater grounding in social reality – they are “what an individual believes will happen in the future” (p.13). They note that in some research, the two terms are used interchangeably, but reiterate their distinction that “aspirations [are] what individuals hope will happen and expectations [are] what individuals think will happen” (Gorard et al, 2012; p.13). For my research, which looks at the relationship between agency and structure and the importance of habitus, the second term is the more relevant, anchored as it is in the reality of previous educational experiences and influences, and their ability to create a concrete image of what might happen during the next stage of academic life for that individual. Thus the concept of habitus becomes pertinent, suggesting that by the time a learner enters 16-19 education they already have an idea of where they might fit within this field, and supporting Khattab’s (2015) suggestion that expectations are therefore determined by “the perceived structure of opportunity within society” (p.734) and contain “an element of assessment that an event, behaviour or an outcome will occur” (p.733) based on past information. However, as previously noted, transition provides an opportunity for transformation, and habitus possesses “permanent capacity for invention” (Bourdieu, 2004; p.63), allowing the possibility of exceeding one’s own expectations by successful adaptation to the new field.

As with learner motivations, a significant strand of the existing literatures is concerned with the impact of socio-economic factors on the expectations held by learners regarding their academic futures and, indeed, the lives that await them after leaving education. Thomson (2002) introduces two hypothetical children, both aged five and about to enter the schooling system. Different experiences await them, even though they are not yet aware of this, because each brings a different “virtual schoolbag full of things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live” (Thomson, 2002; p.1). Because they are from different socioeconomic backgrounds, “educational statistics suggest that these two
children will probably emerge from their schooling in very different places” (p.3), and must learn to shape their academic expectations accordingly. One of the children, Thanh, is from a lower socioeconomic background and does not possess in his virtual schoolbag those skills most valued by the schooling system – he has an aptitude for verbal rather than written language, an understanding of the restaurant trade, and an ability to get on with a range of people. Thus, whilst both he and his parents may aspire for him to go to university, the chances of this are reduced by his background: “if Thanh is to be successful, he must become a person different from the rest of his family, peers and life world” (Thomson, 2002; p.8). Thomson draws heavily on Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and capital in explaining this pattern of reproducing social privilege through lowered expectations, but notes Bourdieu’s insistence that such patterns are not pre-determined. Instead, students (as well as others, such as teachers, parents, college and school principals and policymakers) have the capacity to act. Habitus has the potential for reinvention, and as capital does not hold a fixed value, habitus may also be transformative (Bourdieu, 2004). However, where “some players’ [those who possess the forms of capital currently held to be of higher value] interests are dominant, changing the balance of power in the schooling game is not going to be a simple technical matter” (Thomson, 2002; p.5).

It is thus important to understand where learner expectations come from, and who or what has helped form them. It is well documented that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to go to university than their more advantaged peers (UCAS, 2015), suggesting students are setting themselves lower academic expectations and thereby reproducing the patterns of social inequality identified by Bourdieu (2004) and Thomson (2002) established on or even before entering the schooling system. The drive to widen participation in HE as a bid to address some of these inequalities requires a deeper understanding of why disadvantaged students fail to hold expectations of attending university despite, in many cases, achieving the appropriate grades. Thiele et al (2017) followed the educational trajectories of 13 high-
achieving students, each from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, from primary school to entering a prestigious red-brick university in the UK. Findings suggested that learners’ expectations were low both academically and socially, with “most students convey[ing] an awareness of being perceived as a member of a group that would not fit in, or do well” and their narratives demonstrating “the influence of parents and teachers” (Thiele et al, 2017; p.57). Thiele et al (2017) speak of one participant thus: “due to the peer group she associated with, a challenging school environment and factors such as her low attendance, [name of student] felt that teachers had low expectations of her academic ability”, and felt she had to “push hard to be allowed to take certain challenging subjects, and sit higher-level exams” (Thiele et al, 2017; p.58). This has important implications for how identities may effectively be imposed by others, an idea I return to at the end of this chapter where I link the different elements of the MERITS framework together.

Whilst there is considerable research on learner expectations that does not concern itself primarily with socio-economic factors, this is largely in the context of first year undergraduates who are making or have just made the transition to HE and have expectations of how this new learning environment might differ both socially and academically from previous experiences. Cook and Leckey (1999) considered the expectations both of first year students and of teaching staff at the University of Ulster, finding a mismatch in learner habits and staff expectations of learner behaviour. Despite the difficulties involved in measuring “reality” as discussed below, this study attempted to assess whether student expectations of university met the reality, and if perceptions changed by asking learners to complete a survey at the start of the year and at the end of the first semester. The focus here was on academic expectations rather than anticipated social changes, with questions pertaining to areas such as preferred teaching and learning styles, study methods, study practice and learning support, and found the schooling system had not adequately prepared learners for higher level study and had instilled unrealistic expectations in relation to factors such as class sizes and amount of
independent study required. More specifically, “their perceptions of their own ability will have been coloured by various experiences of their peers and staff at the University who may have had very different attitudes to those of their peers and staff at school… they arrive well equipped for studying at a school with its small class size and easy access to teaching staff. This, however, may be a poor preparation for a university education with its large class sizes and staff involved in a variety of non-teaching functions and, therefore, less available to students” (Cook and Leckey, 1999; pp.168-169).

A similar study by Sander et al (2000) used a questionnaire to explore the expectations of 395 undergraduates beginning their studies at three different British universities in terms of their preferences in teaching, learning and assessment methods. Whilst this research found less of a mismatch between learner expectations and the reality of undergraduate study, it is still notable that teaching methods identified as less popular with participants are those not widely used in the schooling system which had formed the basis of their prior educational experiences – formal lectures, role-playing activities, and student-led presentations requiring a substantial amount of independent research. Both these studies highlight that in a time when university students are customers with a strong awareness of their consumer rights, it is important to recognise that “new undergraduates may have unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of how their course might be delivered” (Sander et al, 2000; p.311) so that those expectations may be managed to a more realistic level and, where possible, adapt provision in order to more closely match expectations and thereby improve learner retention and achievement.

There is relatively little research on learner expectations of moving to a college or sixth form environment at 16, or even on this particular age range. A longitudinal survey of high school students in the Netherlands with an average age of 15 years was conducted by Konings et al (2008), aiming to capture learner expectations of a forthcoming new learning environment and
then measure these against their perceptions of the actuality of that new setting. Whilst these students were part of a different education system, this study identifies some interesting findings on the positive correlation between learner expectations and their later perceptions of their new learning environment. The idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948) suggests an individual creates the scenario that matches their expectations; in other words, will “look for information consistent with the expectations” (Konings et al, 2008), supporting the findings of Herr (1971) in an American study which found that “the way students ordered their expectations of college were positively and consistently related to that which they found to exist in the college environment (Herr, 1971; p.54). The LITP is not a behavioural or psychological study, but the notion that expectations may influence and shape a learner’s perceptions of the reality of college is pertinent, and emphasises the clear links from one element of the MERITS Plus model to the next. Whilst FE remains under-researched in this area, understanding the impact of learner expectations is as crucial in this transition phase as in any other. As Konings et al (2008) point out, “students’ development and their pleasure in school are likely to be disturbed when their expectations of a learning environment do not match with their later perceptions” (p.535), and this is equally true of FE. Indeed, as learners have the power to change provider far more easily than a child may change schools, one can argue it is even more important to consider the part played by expectation in contributing to an individual’s perceptions of reality. I now go on to discuss thus further, in a section named “realities” to reflect the complexity of the issue and the number of different perceptions that may exist at any one time.

**Realities**

Although expectations are more concrete than aspirations, and notwithstanding the potential to exceed one’s own expectations, the fact that every year some learners at NCFE, as at other institutions, swap courses or elect to leave college altogether indicates the reality of their studies does not always meet their expectations. In the academic year 2015/2016, sixth
form colleges in England retained 94.6% of A-Level learners and 92.5% of level three vocational students (although numbers are low for this particular pathway in such institutions), with FE colleges retaining 91.4% and 89.7% respectively (DfE, 2017). Despite the compulsory nature of 16-19 education, some of these retention figures are no better than those in HE, where twenty institutions in the UK have been found to lose around one in ten students who decide not to continue after one year (Mian and Richards, 2016; p.11). It seems not all learners succeed in creating the reality that they expect (Konings et al, 2008), a fact that raises concerns about what becomes of such individuals, particularly those who elect not to transfer to another course or institution and thus potentially drop out of education altogether.

For the purposes of this study, I am interpreting “reality” as espoused participant experiences of academic transition – what has happened since they started college rather than what they expected to happen. However, even allowing for the simplicity of the definition I have chosen, it must be acknowledged that “reality” is not a straightforward term of reference, with suggestions, for example, that much of what is considered factual truth is in fact socially constructed (e.g. Searle, 1995), and that even when an individual sincerely believes they are conveying truths this may not be the case (Goffman, 1959). Goffman’s ideas are discussed further in the chapter that follows, but he suggests the way that individuals present themselves and interpret social interactions in “real” life draws heavily upon theatrical techniques, in that people act out particular roles in what is essentially a performance rather than reality (Goffman, 1959).

Despite the difficulty of measuring the “reality” of experiences, numerous attempts have been made by both researchers and practitioners to record and interpret such data. These often use quantitative rather than qualitative data, with a focus on outcomes and/or
satisfaction levels (see, for example, Knox et al, 1992). One of the best-known attempts to measure this process is the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Pace, 1984), which aimed to capture learner perceptions of the reality of their experiences by asking questions about their backgrounds as well as how they spent their time in college both socially and using the academic facilities. Pace (1984) positioned this as a contextual model, as his approach focused on the learning environment and the way students with different characteristics might be affected by their environment in different ways. The use of quantitative questionnaires is mirrored by NCFE in a simplified format, using module feedback forms at the end of a course which ask students to tick boxes containing graded responses about satisfaction levels next to pre-determined questions about course content, college facilities, quality of teaching and support, and so on but with nothing about individual learner characteristics. Whilst it would clearly be impractical to interview all students who successfully complete a course, it is debateable whether such closed-ended numerical data with a “one size fits all” approach can successfully record or measure the reality of educational experiences, and is an example of how students doing well are not invited to narrate their perceptions of college in the same way that those who underperform or leave early are encouraged to.

That said, other qualitative researchers have attempted the complex process of documenting and explaining how individuals perceive the reality of their experiences, although often in fields other than education. Sharif and Masoumi (2005), for example, tried to measure nurses’ perceptions of the reality of clinical practice by conducting a focus group based around nine stimuli question prompts and subsequently using content analysis with the data. In this type of research, the framework used to prompt and facilitate discussion is key; in this case, the nine questions used to elicit responses during the focus group were directly linked to the participants’ nursing clinical experience and included questions such as “How do you feel about being a student in nursing education?” and “What is your expectation of clinical
experiences?” (Sharif and Masoumi, 2005). These questions are notable in two ways; firstly in the linking of expectations and perceived realities as discussed in the section above, and secondly in their emphasis on the difficulty of identifying an objective reality rather than what individuals “feel” to be the case.

In the same way, the LITP makes no claim to present objectively verifiable truths, but is instead interested in learners’ espoused perceptions of the reality of studying a particular course in an FE college. This element of the model begins to address my third research question: what is the impact of policy and other existing discourses upon the culture and practice of studying a particular programme, and what effect does this have on learner identities? Asking participants how the reality of the course has measured up to their expectations invites them to identify the aspects of their course and of their college experience that they deem the most worthy of inclusion and comment, and places the emphasis on what they wish to include rather than what the researcher thinks they should. This allows for the construction of a view of studying a particular course from the perspective of those actually at the heart of the programme, a crucial aspect of the LITP in helping fill the current gap in qualitative empirical data from learners who are doing well at college and successfully managing the process of transitioning from one learning environment to the next.

The Interrelated Nature of the Model’s Elements

The first part of this chapter has outlined the first three elements of the MERITS Plus model separately, and the chapter that follows does the same with identity and transition. However, the model is designed in such a way that each individual element illuminates understanding of the one that follows, and thus the closing section of this chapter explains the links that exist between learner motivations, expectations and perceptions of reality, and looks ahead
to how these link to learner identity and the process of academic transition. None of these elements exists in isolation, and each helps further understanding of how an individual learner might experience the move from one level of education to the next, with the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools running throughout the different elements of the model and providing a means of better understanding this process as a whole.

Firstly, existing research suggests a link between learner espoused reasons for academic choices and their expectations not just of the course but of their future life trajectory. Kauffman and Husman (2004) highlight the influence of learners' conceptions of time on their motivation and achievement, linking temporal perspectives to different models of motivation and learning such as intrinsic motivation and self-regulation, and identifying in particular the positive effect on motivation brought about when students perceive what they are learning to be useful for the future. This theory of future time perspective suggests whilst some learners are intrinsically motivated and enjoy learning for its own sake, within an education system where “opportunities for autonomous choice are few” and “where students’ grades are used for promotion, students have a restricted choice about what they learn”, and it is therefore vital “to consider types of motivation other than intrinsic interest and flow” such as learners’ future hopes for jobs and degrees (Kauffman and Husman, 2004; p.2). Whilst this study took place in America, Chapter Two has already outlined that “opportunities for autonomous choice” are similarly rare in the English education system, and thus learners and those who influence them should be vigilant in ensuring reasons for course selection are commensurate with future expectations.

It also seems significant whether the learner holds largely intrinsic or extrinsic motivations for selecting their pathway and electing to remain on it (or otherwise). A number of studies highlight the relationship between learner motivation and expectations of a learning
environment, indicating that “expectations of at least some characteristics of a learning environment can be hypothesised to be related to motivation” (Konings et al, 2008; p.536). They go on to point out that motivation is one aspect of a wider range of learner characteristics that can be related to expectations, and use a scale of learning styles to define different types of learning orientation and how these may influence both expectations and how these expectations then relate to reality. Under this scale, intrinsic motivation is explained as “learning because of interest in learning content and the desire to develop oneself” (Konings et al, 2008; p.540), as opposed to certificate oriented (motivated by the gaining of high grades and certificates) or vocation oriented, where learning is undertaken with a view to following a particular profession. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive; for example, confidence that course content will be useful in future applications can lead to higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Simons et al, 2004). In turn, learner expectations have then been found to influence individuals’ perceptions of the reality of their experiences, as “expectations determine the way in which students enter a course or learning environment” (Konings et al, 2008; p.535) by creating a sense of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Understanding the interrelated nature of these elements is crucial in supporting learning and raising student achievement, as expectations affect both “the subsequent perception of a learning environment and so determine its effectiveness” and “students’ motivations, engagement, and investment of effort in learning” (Konings et al, 2008; p.536).

The following chapter outlines the existing literatures on identity and transition, and thus I close this one with a brief discussion of how motivations, expectations and perceptions of reality link to issues of learner identity and academic transition. As previously stated, the identity and transition elements of the model are given greater prominence in this thesis because the LITP argues that the motivations, expectations and realities espoused in the learner narratives contribute to that individual’s sense of identity during a time of transition. The education system in England (and many other countries) requires all learners to go
through the process of transition from one academic stage to the next more than once, a process that may include a physical change of location as well as an academic progression. Each of these transitions involves motivations for choices, new expectations, and a fresh process of negotiating how the reality of those choices match (or otherwise) expectations. If, as suggested in the following chapter, identity is fluid and dynamic rather than fixed, it is important to consider not only how the process of transition can impact upon identity, but how reasons for choosing a course and expectations and perceptions of a new learning stage and/or environment may affect how an individual frames and narrates their own sense of identity.

In understanding the different elements that may affect an individual’s sense of self, it is also relevant to the LITP’s interests to consider where certain ideas have come from, and the possibility that identities may be imposed by others and the expectations they hold of that individual. Much of the existing literature in this area highlights the influence of external agents such as parents (see, for example, Gonida and Urdan, 2007) and teachers (as discussed above in relation to Thiele et al, 2017) on learner motivations and subsequent perceptions of identity. As already identified, learner espoused motivations, expectations and perceptions may be intrinsic, extrinsic, or a combination of the two, and even where individuals identify largely intrinsic factors such as the wish to undertake learning for its own sake, these values have nevertheless been acquired from somewhere, even if the individual is not consciously aware of this: “the school environment is often one in which there is strong parental and teacher support for students both in advising them how to study and providing sources of external motivation” (Cook and Leckey, 1999; p.169). The following chapter suggests that identity is dialogic, and may alter not only over time as the individual grows and matures, but in different physical and social contexts under the influence of other people and environments. The process of transition to college as researched in the LITP is a time during which an individual must navigate a new learning environment, new relationships with
peers and teachers, and a new status as a college student rather than school pupil. Thus, having summarised the main issues of learner motivations, expectations and realities and how they may link to identity during a time of transition, I now go on to consider identity and transition in detail, before presenting the methodology used to synthesise individual learner stories into a cohesive whole.
Chapter Four: Identity and Transition

Introduction

This chapter presents the existing literatures on identity and transition and how they can illuminate the issues outlined in the previous two chapters, with a focus on how a learner’s sense of self may be impacted by different contexts. The broad range of existing literatures on identity makes it impossible to discuss all aspects in a study of this scale, and thus the first section of this chapter focuses on areas most pertinent to the LITP: ideas around the relationship between agency and structure, the fluid and dialogic nature of identity, and notions of collective identity (encompassing social identity theory). These have been used as subheadings, although such divisions are inevitably arbitrary due to the interrelatedness of many of these concepts, and some ideas are discussed in more than one section. The chapter then moves on to consider literatures which discuss issues faced by learners during the process of academic transition, both from one educational environment to another and from one level of study to the next, before concluding with a consideration of how these may impact upon the identity of the individual learner undergoing the process of academic transition. In this chapter there is a particular focus on Bourdieu’s thinking tools (1977, 1986, 2004), many of which are used in my interpretation and analysis of the learner narratives collected in the study. In particular, I consider agency and structure, habitus, capital, and the field of 16-19 education and the games and misrecognitions that may occur there. These thinking tools are useful in helping understand individual practice (in this case, how an individual narrates their own experiences of academic transition) in relation to objective social structures, such as educational institutions and the rules and discourses that are in force within these environments.
Theories of Identity

Agency and Structure

Much of the existing literature on identity looks at the relationship between an individual’s own sense of self and their ability to make personal choices (and thereby demonstrate agency), and the environments (or structures) within which they operate. For Bourdieu (1977), agency refers to the idea that an individual has the ability to exercise choice through a sense of intentionality, and by so doing, take some control of their own path in life – such as when choosing level three study options at the age of 16, for example. However, this sense of individuality and personal autonomy does not exist in isolation, and in practice agency is limited by its relation to the social and cultural structures which organise and give meaning to an individual’s environment – the rules, values and systems already in place and by which we interpret our place in the world. In other words, whilst a learner may feel they are exercising a free choice when selecting their options at 16, this may be a form of misrecognition – an unawareness that these choices reflect a role that has already been preassigned. Bourdieu (1977) argues these structures can reproduce existing social inequalities, particularly as those from higher-class backgrounds are seen as more deserving due to the particular forms of capital they hold. It is an oversimplification of Bourdieu’s ideas to suggest that the degree and types of capital held by an individual are directly linked to class position, but as outlined in Chapter Two, certain forms of schooling remain largely the preserve of the privileged.

Bourdieu’s (1977, 2004) concepts of habitus and field are also relevant to the LITP in considering how an individual, with their own personal beliefs and experiences, might become assimilated within a wider educational habitus where a shared sense of disposition is identified with others who have chosen the same academic path. For Bourdieu, habitus
represents both the way in which individuals develop a sense of self through establishing their own personal attitudes and dispositions, and how these individuals then engage in different forms of practice with others of a similar disposition. This thinking tool has been widely used in a range of disciplines (see, for example, Davey, 2009; Nolan, 2011; Morberg et al, 2011; James et al, 2015; Gopaul, 2014) to examine how individual identities are affected by the process of transition, and explore why some thrive whilst others struggle to adapt. The idea that some individuals naturally carry a disposition that predisposes them to succeed in higher-level study that values the demonstration of achievement through examinations overlaps with Thomson’s (2002) notion of the “virtual schoolbag” (p.7), where every individual takes with them into their schooling the habitus they have already begun to develop during their lives at home. Whilst the LITP does not take into account socio-economic factors and did not invite interviewees to talk about their home life, the notion of a particular disposition existing amongst certain groups of learners and not others is pertinent to my research interests. It is also important to note that habitus possesses “permanent capacity for invention” (Bourdieu, 2004; p.63), a key factor for consideration when studying learners entering a new field and its associated structures, both in terms of what that new field may reveal and what it may add to an individual’s existing habitus.

Bourdieu’s metaphor of field as a site of cultural practice suggests a field not only comprises rules, rituals and conventions but also consists of the conflict created when individuals or groups of individuals negotiate their place within this site. Thus any given field provides the context in which capital acquires value – an important idea in understanding the relationship between agency and structure. As discussed in Chapter Two, whilst a learner does have some choice in what and where they elect to study, this is in practice restricted by the options available to them and, very often, by the grades achieved at GCSE, thus highlighting the relationship between an individual’s sense of agency and intentionality and the cultural field in which they must operate. For Bourdieu (1977), choices are always underpinned by a
sense of agency, but one must always understand the limitations of that agency in the context of the possibilities offered by its relation to cultural fields.

Bourdieu’s thinking tools, particularly habitus and cultural capital, are thus useful as a lens through which to begin understanding an individual’s academic identity and how this may be constructed and demonstrated in practice. The forms of culture which students possess as they enter 16-19 education are those acquired during their previous experiences, and the relative positions they adopt in the new field are reflective of those established at secondary school. Some research suggests that habitus can be limiting; for example, Colley et al (2003) identify “vocational habitus” as being one which conditions learners to have lower expectations from their future careers and to develop more menial dispositions in preparation for their position in the workplace hierarchy, although it should be noted that this research took place within an occupational context with learners studying different types of vocational courses than the learners in the LITP. However, whilst a learner’s habitus does possess inherited concepts and attitudes, these need not dictate an individual’s future behaviour – habitus is adaptive, and these embodied attitudes may be continuously modified in response to new situations. As Davey (2009) points out, “entry to a new field can be seen as providing the opportunity for habitus to change” (p.277), and whilst the pre-accumulated “layers of knowledge and experience provide the individual with the tools to change” and therefore reflect the types of capital already possessed by the individual, “habitus is open to possibilities and potentials rather than fixed certainties” (p.277). Additionally, the adaptive nature of habitus helps to explain the generation and regeneration of social structures by the agents who participate within such structures, allowing the possibility of change within a given field and suggesting that the status quo can be troubled by such agents. Thus agency has the potential to change the relations between different fields, although caution must be sounded as to the extent of this influence, with Bathmaker (2015) warning that “field enables a critical consideration of apparently progressive changes to support and encourage
students who follow vocational and alternative routes [into higher education], which can however be misrecognised as transformative, when in practice their value may not transfer to other fields” (p.74).

Identity as Fluid and Dialogic

Another strand of the literatures on identity is concerned with the fluid nature of identity: the notion that an individual's sense of self is not fixed, but is influenced both by the longitudinal passing of time and by the different contexts and structures in which that individual operates at any given period. Whilst the primary focus of this chapter is the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools to understand identity, it is pertinent to outline some of these ideas and how they relate to the LITP, particularly as individuals have the capacity to adapt to new experiences and environments through the habitus.

Jenkins (2004) suggests an individual may simultaneously have any number of different identities dependent on particular contexts, reflecting the fluid and dialogic nature of identity. Whilst the participants in the LITP, for example, had been invited to discuss their experiences as learners entering a particular educational programme, it is important to remember that being a student is just one aspect of their own personal identity – they are not only part of an academic cohort, but are also a son or a daughter, a friend, an acquaintance, a former school pupil and possibly a sibling or a member of any number of sports teams or common interest groups. This not only means that an individual may simultaneously have multiple identities at any one time, but that changes in these identities are likely to take place as contexts change and evolve; the participants in the LITP have ceased to be school pupils and must now negotiate a new identity as school leaver and college student.
This also, of course, has implications for the practitioner-researcher, whose identity as both interviewer and teacher may affect the narrative presented by the interviewee in this situation through the two-way process of interaction and interpretation. This notion of the dialogic nature of identity is a recurrent theme throughout much of the literature; see, for example, the work of Holland and Lave (2001), who stress that identity is open-ended and rooted in social practice. Whilst this may mean that the act of narrating one’s experiences is inherently unreliable, the focus of the LITP means that this is an advantage rather than a disadvantage, as my interests lie in exploring whether an individual’s sense of identity affects the way in which they narrate their experiences of academic transition. Bakhtin (1986) suggests that any act of autobiography (such as the one the participants have been asked to produce) is unreliable, as the self does not exist independently from the world and we therefore cannot avoid judging ourselves and our experiences according to the values of others: “Our speech… is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’….These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” (p.89). Thus the analysis of the learner narratives looks not for absolute truths but instead considers how external factors and contexts have influenced the espousal of particular viewpoints when considering academic experiences. Whilst it is beyond the scope of the LITP to attempt a full discourse analysis on these narratives, it is relevant to note that – sometimes unbeknownst to the individual – language can be “recruited…to enact specific social activities and social identities” (Gee, 2013; p.1); in other words, an individual’s sense of self-perception may be both shaped by the language they hear around them and created and maintained through their own language choices, underlining the socially and linguistically constructed nature of identity within different contexts.

This fluidity can make an individual’s true identity – if such a thing exists – difficult to identify. To explain the existence of multiple, ever-changing identities, Goffman (1959) proposes a
“dramaturgical” perspective: life is a play, “a theatrical performance” (p.9), in which those who participate are assigned roles by other people. An individual may be taken in by their own performance and fully believe the act they are staging represents reality, although Goffman stresses that in practice, this represents one extreme end of a continuum of belief. To complicate the identification of an individual’s true self further, Goffman (1959) also suggests individuals can be influenced to behave differently from how they normally would by becoming a member of a group or “team” that possesses particular “standards” (p.87). This “social front” can “become institutionalised in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise” (Goffman, 1959; p.37), suggesting that the front – a form of performance – can become a “collective representation’ and a fact in its own right” (Goffman, 1959; p.37). The idea that an individual’s own sense of identity may be affected by association with others is now considered further through a discussion of collective identity.

Collective Identity

In its most basic interpretation, the concept of collective identity is “the social aspects of the self and the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of their relationships to others and to social groups” (Brewer and Gardner, 1996: p.83), with a sense that “collective identification evokes powerful imagery of people who are in some respect(s) apparently similar to each other” (Jenkins, 2004: p.79). In practice, the notion of collective or shared identities is far more complex, with Jenkins (2004) suggesting an individual’s identity is both about sameness and difference, prompting a need to reconcile one’s own sense of self as an individual with a recognition that elements of this identity are likely to be shared with others. In this section I outline some of the key ideas on the subject, including how notions of collective identity are often bound up with social movements, that collective identity is a process rather than a product, and how although “people must have something significant in
common...before we can talk about their membership of a collectivity...this similarity cannot be recognised without simultaneously evoking differentiation” (Jenkins, 2004: p.79).

According to Snow (2001), “there are at least three conceptually distinct types of identity: personal, social, and collective”, and that “although they often overlap, one cannot be inferred from the other” (unpaged). Collective identity can appear amongst any grouping in any context, since “its essence resides in a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences”, agreeing with Jenkins’ (2004) evocation of difference, as these attributes and experiences are defined in relation to “one or more actual or imagined sets of ‘others’” (Snow, 2001; unpaged). These are interesting ideas in the context of the LITP with its use of two student groups, although a reflexive approach does not assume difference as this could potentially create or maintain divisions that would not otherwise exist. Snow (2001) emphasises the complex nature of the relationship between the three types of identity, with the “self-designations and self-attributions regarded as personally distinctive” (unpaged) of one’s personal identity often formed and asserted when in contact with other, contradictory identities, and one’s social identity largely grounded in established social roles (such as, for example, the roles assigned to students of differing academic ability within the schooling system). These overlaps between different types of identity indicate the difficulty of separating an individual’s own sense of self from the social structures and contexts within which they are located.

As already noted, discourse is one way in which groups create or maintain a distinction between themselves and others, either consciously or without knowing. Bernstein’s (1971) concept of elaborated and restricted language codes suggests particular forms of language (a limited or restricted range of vocabulary) may be used amongst individuals who share some aspect of a collective identity. Bernstein developed these ideas to help explain why students from lower-class backgrounds were achieving better results in mathematics-based
subjects than in language-based ones, where they were falling behind compared to students from middle-class backgrounds. Whilst the LITP does not attempt a full linguistic analysis, the supposition that some individuals use language differently from others because of membership of a particular group suggests common forms of language may emerge in the narratives of different groups of learners, either as a way of unconsciously cementing their collective identity or as a result of differing forms of capital accumulated at school.

**Social identity Theory**

A further strand of the literatures on identity – and one that is closely linked with the ideas of collectivity discussed above – focuses on “social identity…that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 2010; p.2). This approach, whereby individuals are categorized socially into different groups, both by themselves and others, “explains intergroup behavior in terms of underlying cognitive representations” (Brewer, 1996; p.292), with Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposing three mental stages of the process: social categorisation, social identification and social comparison.

If, as Tajfel (1974) suggests, an individual’s sense of self is defined by social contexts where “he is a member of numerous social groups and that this membership contributes, positively or negatively, to the image that he has of himself” (p.69), then the temptation may be to confirm one’s own status by enhancing the positive characteristics of the group(s) to which one belongs; after all, “in our kinds of societies, an individual strives to achieve a satisfactory concept or image of himself” (Tajfel, 1974; p.68). Much of the literature in the field of social identity adopts a psychological perspective and focuses on the concept of ingroups and outgroups, with the ingroup being the social group with which an individual most closely
identifies and thus claims membership of. By definition, the existence of an ingroup assumes the presence of an outgroup as a means of providing a sense of boundary for the ingroup through a process of social differentiation (Allport, 1954). It has been argued both that loyalty to one’s ingroup requires a sense of hostility and/or competition towards the outgroup (Sherif, 1966) and the opposite: that ingroups actually define themselves through internal regard and support rather than external hostility, and represent “bounded communities of mutual trust and obligation that delimit mutual interdependence and cooperation” (Brewer, 1999; p.434).

Whilst for Tajfel (1974) this simple opposition of ingroups and outgroups is too one-sided, he nevertheless acknowledges that throughout life an individual encounters “a complex network of groupings which presents him with a network of relationships into which he must fit himself”, and that the quest to “find, create and define his place in these networks” represents a “continuing process of definition” (p.67). Such a process must, by necessity, lead to conflict as individuals negotiate their place within these groups and bid to have their own habitus and capital recognised. For Brewer and Gardner (1996), there is no easy way of overcoming problems of intergroup relations, as any solution must respect how great an influence that identification with a particular ingroup can exert over an individual’s behaviour. Attempts to understand “why social identifications are so essential to an individual’s sense of a stable, coherent self” (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; p.296) have led to “optimal distinctiveness theory” (Brewer, 1991, 1999), which recognises that individuals have both a need to be included and assimilated – in other words, to feel that they belong to particular social groups – and to be differentiated from others, although, as noted above, this need not necessarily manifest as hostility towards the outgroup.

The existing literatures on identity outlined in the first half of this chapter indicate that identity is not fixed, and as The Teaching and Learning Research Project (undated, based on work
by Ecclestone et al) suggests that “transition depicts change and shifts in identity and agency as people progress through the education system” (TLRP: undated, unpaged), I now go on to consider theories of transition and the changes this process may bring.

**Theories of Transition**

The contexts outlined in Chapter Two indicate a sixteen-year-old learner faces a number of different transitions. Many will be moving from study at level two, normally GCSEs, to level three, and thus facing a process of academic and pedagogical transition. In addition to this, learners who are moving from the secondary school where they are likely to have spent the last five years to a different educational environment have both physical and social transitions to manage; indeed, even those remaining at their school sixth form are likely to encounter a different ethos along with new people and routines compared to the structures in place lower down the school.

Much of the existing literature on the subject of transition agrees the process is likely to consist of – as a minimum – both academic and social change, with Terenzini et al (1994) noting the process of transition requires students to “become integrated into the academic and social systems of a college or university” (p58); in other words, an individual must reconcile their own sense of who they are (and who they would like to be) with the educational structures and pathways available to them. Each of these is considered in the following sections. The subject of academic transition has been widely researched, and I draw upon studies conducted in countries other than the UK in order to demonstrate that there is some commonality of experience for learners no matter where their education takes place. However, 16-19 education is under-researched in comparison with other sectors and there is also relatively little in the existing literatures on the subject of the impact that educational transition (and the institutional integration highlighted above) may have on
individual identity. Therefore, I conclude this chapter by considering how the LITP contributes to the existing ideas in this field.

**Academic Transition**

One strand of the literature on transition focuses on the pedagogical changes that learners are likely to face when progressing from one educational level to the next. New applicants enquiring about or applying for level three courses at NCFE are told to expect certain differences in the way courses are delivered compared to the GCSEs they have studied at school. A-Level courses at NCFE, for example, are allocated four and half hours of taught time per subject every week, with students warned to expect to complete at least another four and half hours of private study per subject per week, whilst BTEC students are timetabled a day off every week in order to complete assignments independently of their tutors. Whilst the intention is to develop the independent study skills required for HE, regardless of which academic pathway the learner has chosen, this requirement to manage one’s own time and learning can prove challenging for students moving from a school environment where their time has been carefully managed on their behalf, with Hernandez-Martinez et al (2011) noting that some form of “continuity of curriculum and pedagogy” must be provided to new learners if they are to successfully manage the transition process. This responsibility falls to educational institutions, who should take steps to minimise “the potentially risky consequences for learners by trying to ‘bridge the gap’” (Hernandez-Martinez et al, 2011: p.120, drawing upon the ideas of Schagen and Kerr 1999).

Whilst relatively little research exists on transition from secondary school to college, this risk is mirrored elsewhere in the education system. A number of studies suggest that children moving from primary to secondary school suffer drops in academic achievement or motivation (or both), due in part to an inability to handle the changes required by this
process, such as new subjects and teachers (see, for example, Otis et al, 2005; McGee et al, 2003). The process is further complicated by the fact that the size of most educational institutions means even where teachers are closely following qualification specifications in terms of content, no single pedagogical approach will be in place. In one of the few studies of the academic changes involved in moving from level two to level three study, Williams (2011) established a teaching continuum to classify the range of pedagogical approaches observable, from transmissionist (“teacher driven”) to connectionist (“relational above procedural understanding”). Within one department, two of the teachers of Maths A-Level “self-reported their teaching at the opposite extremes of a scale we designed to measure transmissionist/teacher-centredness of teaching practices” (p.135), with one teacher describing his teaching as “old-fashioned” in the sense that “preparing for the next test is always on the classroom agenda” (p.135), whilst the other teacher’s approach to curriculum delivery involved “significant amounts of time spent on conceptual development ‘for understanding’, involving group work, problem-solving and discussion” (p.136). Such research emphasises the importance of taking real-life contexts into account, both in terms of the variety of positioning amongst staff and the need to recognise that the curriculum must be delivered in such a way that students will succeed in the formal external assessments used to measure all level three qualifications.

Physical and Social Transition

Increasingly, research indicates social transition is just as important as academic transition; indeed, many studies have concluded that the two are inseparable elements of the same process. These studies are not restricted to the UK; universities worldwide have for some time shared the same concerns over retention, with Kantanis (2000) noting that in Australia “approximately one third of students drop out in the first-year of university” (p.100) in a study
that suggests concerns over attracting and keeping students is not a recent development. Concerns over retention are no longer limited to HE institutions – students in England now have to remain in some form of education until 18, and with institutions receiving substantial funding for each student they recruit and retain, the penalties for failing to keep students can be severe.

Kantanis (2000) concludes “social transition underpins a successful academic transition to university”, and that “development (or lack) of a friendship network featured as a critical factor in students’ level of adjustment” (p.102). This idea is supported by the work of Terenzini et al (1994), whose study of American learners making the transition to college found that “making new friends dominated their conversation…the most threatening disjunction was interpersonal, not academic” (p.62). In fact, the importance of positive relationships with peers in successfully managing the transition process appears consistent across all age ranges, with Demetriou et al (2000) finding in their study of children in the UK moving from primary to secondary school the “importance of friendship to a student’s self-esteem…particularly at transfer or in the face of new and challenging situations” (p.435) and that this could result in increased commitment and achievement from the child.

Managing Transition: the role of theoretical models and frameworks

The question of how to manage and support learners during transition has been increasingly popular as an area for research in recent years, with Kift’s (2005, 2009) work on Transition Pedagogy suggesting this is a complex process requiring a whole-institution approach. Whilst Kift’s research specifically relates to university students, her philosophy that all stakeholders should work together to ensure that both the curriculum and the support mechanisms in place create a culture that “carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts” (Kift, 2009; p.4) seems
equally applicable to FE contexts, particularly in its recognition that a number of different learner types and identities may exist within any one cohort.

This approach has been increasingly adopted in HE as a means of supporting and retaining learners (and, of course, protecting the income they bring) – see, for example, the work of McIntosh (2016) in mapping student journeys at the University of Bolton in order to better understand the transition process experienced by first year undergraduates. McIntosh’s research makes use of the ICE Model originally used by the NHS with their patients – the three stages standing for ideas, concerns and expectations – and transfers it to an educational context by interviewing students using questions based around this framework. Other researchers have confirmed the usefulness of applying theoretical models and frameworks to understanding academic transition and how this relates to student identity - some of which are outlined in the section that follows – and have thus established a tradition in which I locate my own conceptual framework, the MERITS Plus Model. I now conclude with a consideration of this tradition and how it relates to my own research.

**Impact of Transition upon the Development of Learner Identity**

As the LITP is concerned with the potential impact of academic transition upon individual learner identity, it is important to consider how these two theoretical fields may be linked in practice. The interplay between academic transition and the impact it may have upon identity is relatively under-researched outside of HE contexts, despite recognition that students leaving school are also “undergoing a transition of another kind, that ‘from adolescence to adulthood’” (Kantanis, 2000; p.105 – speaking of those making the transition to university, but just as pertinent to the learners in the LITP) and that “in a new environment, meeting
new people, exposed to new ideas and different values can be a testing time for many adolescents’ strength of character” (Kantanis, 2000; p,106).

Another way of looking at this transition – in which one meets new people and encounters new structures, values and ideas – is as a time of opportunity in terms of establishing a new or true identity, as seen in Gregory (2013a). This is particularly true for the participants in the LITP, who are not only stepping up to a new academic level but also moving to a new environment after spending the previous five years in one secondary school. This is a chance for students to make new friends and present their identity in a new light, away from those who have known them since the age of eleven and who may be resistant to accepting changes in identity. Thus the LITP offers the possibility that the process of academic transition can have a positive impact upon individual learner identity, despite its challenges. This positive impact has already been noted in studies conducted in other areas of the education system, with Sirsch (2003) recognising the transition process from primary to secondary school offers the opportunity for children to grow and learn by overcoming the challenges posed, and Kantanis (2000) identifying that transition to HE provides the chance to move from adolescence to adulthood. Studies such as these highlight the transformative nature of the habitus and its capacity for positive change and reinvention (Bourdieu, 2004).

Additionally, whilst transitions occur regularly throughout an educational journey, some appear more significant in helping define one’s future path and subsequent identity. Demetriou et al (2000) found in their study of secondary school children in the UK that “in students’ eyes year 8 [second year of secondary school, where most students will be aged 12] in particular lacks a clear and compelling identity…year 8 has neither the compelling novelty of year 7, nor the promise of ownership through option choices of year 9, nor the ‘real world’ urgency of years 10 and 11 [when students will be studying for their GCSEs]”
This raises interesting ideas for the LITP, where participants have not only exercised ownership of their academic options, but now, like the year 10 and 11 students identified above, have two years of “‘real world’ urgency” in which to make a success of the course they have chosen. The impact of timing upon how different instances of transition may affect learner identity supports Bourdieu’s (1977) notion that whilst choices may be underpinned by a sense or belief of agency, individual agency is limited by contexts and possibilities.

The LITP draws upon these ideas and offers the MERITS Plus model as means of conceptualising the existing literatures on identity and transition and their complex relationship. The use of a conceptual framework to help understand the issues and challenges faced by learners is not a recent development in educational research, although much of this work pertains to university students, particularly those in their first year of study. Kift’s (2005, 2009) influential work in Australia suggests that support for first year undergraduates can be aided by basing the curriculum around six key principles: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring. This recognises that educational providers have a responsibility to adopt a whole institution approach to supporting learners and in recognising the impact that transitions may have upon both cohorts and individuals, a principle also adopted in Morgan’s (2012) more recent research in the UK. The Student Lifecycle Model (Morgan, 2012) has been used to articulate a learner’s path through education as a journey, and recognises that student groups are not homogenous – each individual will have a different student lifecycle and require differing support, depending on their previous life experiences.

Alongside this approach, the Student Experience Practitioner Model (Morgan, 2012) suggests that all staff – including administrative – have a part to play in designing and
implementing support mechanisms to scaffold learners as they move through their student journey. Such an approach is particularly relevant during a time of both massification and diversification in HE, with recent work by Whannell and Whannell (2015) in Australia identifying that any “approach to the question of undergraduate student behaviour relating to attrition/retention and engagement must incorporate some form of theoretical framework incorporating the psychology of the individual” (p.44). Their suggested theoretical framework is based on identity theory, and considers the relationship between three elements: emotional commitment, university student identity, and university student role, emphasising the importance of social contexts in examining an individual’s academic identity. What these models have in common is a recognition that a range of learner identities exist within any given educational institution, and that the process of transition affects learners and their sense of self in different ways. This is acknowledged in my own model through the sixth element of the framework: Stories and Synthesis. Although not discussed here in its own right, this element of the model is addressed fully in Chapter Seven, where the composite learner profiles are presented and discussed in order to illustrate the range of stories collected in the study.

Chapters Three and Four have outlined the key ideas and literatures on the first five elements of the MERITS Plus model – motivations, expectations, reality, identity and transition - and considered how the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools helps make sense of the issues raised. I now go on to discuss the methodology adopted in the LITP by explaining the design of the study and how data was collected and handled.
Chapter Five: Research Design

Introduction and research questions

This chapter describes and justifies the research design of the LITP, and locates the study within relevant research traditions and methodologies. The primary focus of the study is the impact of academic choices and transition on student identity within current political contexts. The methods outlined here have been specifically designed to capture relevant data allowing me to examine the complex relationship between identity, transition, policy and choice and address the following research questions:

What factors do learners identify as having impacted on their academic choices in deciding to study either A-Levels or a BTEC as a level three programme of study?

What ideas and attitudes do learners hold about their chosen qualification on entering the programme, and where have these come from?

What is the impact of policy and other existing discourses upon the culture and practice of studying a particular programme, and what effect does this have on learner identities?

How do students on different academic programmes narrate their educational experiences, and is a sense of collective identity evident amongst different cohorts?

The LITP adopts a case study methodology, and this chapter begins by outlining the case and site of the research and considering the ethnographic elements of the study as well as the ethical implications for the researcher undertaking such a study in their own place of work. I then outline the way datasets were collected, handled and analysed, as well as discussing access to participants and associated ethical issues.
Methodological approach

Outline of the case study

The LITP is sited in NCFE, and is an ethnographic case study where the ‘case’ is learner narratives of transition and identity. Within the case study I have collected two datasets. The first of these consists of transcriptions of individual interviews with 24 students, in which participants narrated their own experiences of the transition from school to college. The participants were aged 16-19 and studying a full-time level three course at NCFE. One group of learners comprised those studying a BTEC in one single subject, while another contained learners studying three or four different subjects at AS-Level. Twelve students from each group took part in individual 30-minute interviews, which were transcribed and analysed both thematically and linguistically and then used to create eight composite learner profiles, drawn directly from the narratives as detailed below. These were then discussed by five members of staff in a focus group, the transcription of which constitutes dataset two.

I have already completed two pilot studies at NCFE (Gregory, 2013a and 2013b), and selected this institution as the site of my research for two reasons. Firstly, I work at the college, meaning easier access to participants and greater co-operation from colleagues than might have been the case if I were an external researcher: “It is generally presumed that access is more easily granted to the insider researcher and that data collection is less timeconsuming” (Mercer, 2007; p.5). Secondly, whilst research located within a single site is inevitably restricted in scope, NCFE partially mitigates these limitations due to its size and range of both courses and learners. In the academic year 2014-2015, NCFE had approximately 4,700 full-time learners (defined as those participating in at least 540 guided learning hours per year) aged 16-19. Of these, between 900 and 1000 are likely to progress to university based on previous years’ figures. Whilst it is beyond the remit of the LITP to consider the effect of socio-economic background upon academic transition, interviewing a
range of learners with different prior experiences has allowed me to consider Raffo’s (2014, drawing upon Bourdieu, 1986 and Thomson, 2002) view that “young people enter schooling from different structural positions, associated with differing social habitus, wherein they embody distinctive and different qualities of cultural disposition, or ‘habitus’” (p.48-9).

**Approach to knowledge: ontology and epistemology, and the use of ethnographic case studies**

Robson (2002) deconstructs Yin’s (1981, 1994) definition of the case study, highlighting several characteristics of this approach pertinent to my own study. From Yin’s summary (reproduced in Robson, 2002: p.178) that a “case study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence”, Robson (2002) identifies that this stance allows the researcher to focus both on the “the particular: a study of that specific case” and “what kind of generalization is possible from the case”, and on “a phenomenon in context, typically in situations where the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not clear” (Robson, 2002: p.179). This focus on context is highlighted in Geertz’s (1973) differentiation between thick and thin description, where the former describes events in relation to their cultural contexts rather than simply describing what has happened. Whilst the LITP is primarily interested in narrative accounts of experiences rather than the charting and observations of actions, “an emphasis [that] is not just on describing what ‘is’ but on explaining how the nature of this phenomenon is closely linked to other aspects of its social context” (Denscombe, 2010: p.328) is relevant in attempting to address my research questions. Thus whilst Johnson and Christensen (2004) separate the case study methodology from other qualitative research methods such as ethnography, the LITP includes aspects of this approach, such as my interest in how different individuals experience the phenomenon of academic transition and whether there are noticeable
similarities in “the shared attitudes, values, norms, practices, patterns of interaction, perspectives, and language of a group of people” (Johnson and Christensen, 2004; p.46).

The ethnographic element to the study is most apparent in my immersion in the site of the research, “participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions- in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; p.1). Whilst the LITP does not make use of observations, participant or otherwise, the use of student interviews and staff focus group to collect data recognises the importance of contact with human agents within the context of their daily lives emphasised by ethnography (O'Reilly, 2005), and my dual role as both practitioner and researcher highlights the reflexive nature of the ethnographic approach both in terms of the practice of research and the role of the researcher in producing knowledge through research. To this end, it is important to note that my role in the study was entirely overt. Due to its heavy reliance upon interpretivism, the case study methodology has sometimes been considered a “‘soft option’” (Robson, 2002: p.179) compared to more objective, positivist approaches – “even with good faith and intentions, biased and selective accounts can undoubtedly emerge” (Robson, 2002: p.180). I have thus devised “appropriate checks to demonstrate what in experimental design terms are referred to as the reliability and validity of the findings” (Robson, 2002: p.180). These “checks” include a detailed consideration of the design and implementation of the interview schedule as the primary research tool, transparency in how the data has subsequently been analysed, interpreted and presented, the use of a staff focus group to discuss the validity of the study’s conclusions, and the adoption of a reflexive stance in my own role as practitioner researcher as detailed in the ethics section below.
The case study, then, is “a well-established research strategy where the focus is on a case…in its own right, and taking its context into account” (Robson, 2002: p.178), and the LITP is thus underpinned by a subjectivist approach or ontology, using qualitative research methods to understand how individuals interpret the world around them and construct their own versions of reality. This approach reflects my interest in the idea that experiences are socially constructed – the product of a number of factors and inseparable from the contexts in which these experiences take place. As an education practitioner conducting a professional doctorate, my research is very much located in a real-life context. Thus the focus “on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live” (Holloway, 1997; p.1) is the most appropriate method of addressing my research questions and the overall aims of the study, by allowing me to use a range of methods to collect data on one particular unit of analysis – in this case, the learner narratives – and produce a “rich description of the context and operation of the case or cases” (Johnson and Christensen, 2004: p.363).

**Conceptualisation of the LITP**

This study does not aim to provide objective truths but is instead interested in the process by which learners construct their own narratives within particular academic contexts, reflecting that “our stories are not and can never be wholly personal. Rather, we perceive reality in terms of stories, and ultimately how we construct, interpret, digest and recount for others our own experiences bears a strong relationship to the story-lines that are already ‘out there’” (Andrews et al: 2004, p.100). The LITP conceptualises its case study through the MERITS Plus model, which provides a framework for data analysis as well as a means of contextualising the data through the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools. As detailed in Chapter Two and Appendix 5, the MERITS Plus model was created to conceptualise the existing literatures on academic transition and identity, with the later addition of a layer of
Bourdeusian analysis to allow the exploration of anomalies and to contextualise the data. Thus, the aims of the study are not to establish any form of objective “truth”, but instead to better understand how individual identities are constructed and narrated within particular educational contexts, and thereby establish the relationship between academic choices, transition and learner identity.

To this end, the use of narrative interviews and the subsequent creation of composite profiles places great importance upon language and the role it plays in both how an individual presents himself or herself and how that individual is then perceived in their everyday interactions with others. Bruner (1991) and others have emphasised the non-neutral nature of language: not only do individuals use it as a tool to make sense of their experiences, the terms in which those experiences are then reconstructed affect how others see us and reflect our social and cultural positioning whether we are consciously aware of this or not. This functional approach, focusing on how an individual interprets events and experiences in the construction and relaying of their own narrative, emphasises the “great difficulty in distinguishing what may be called the narrative mode of thought from the forms of narrative discourse” and that, as such, “narrative constructions can only achieve ‘verisimilitude’” (Bruner, 1991; p.5). For the LITP, with its interest in how academic transition has impacted upon individuals and their perceived identities rather than in educational progression per se, these characteristics - which Alvermann (2000) categorises under the headings “Subjectivity and the Reflexive Self”, “Crisis of Legitimation” and “Crisis of Representation” - are far from being disadvantageous. Narrative research is by its very definition collaborative in nature, as every narrative is likely to differ according to the audience to whom the story is being told, suggesting that “according to this view, there is no static and everlasting truth. Instead there are different subjective positions from which we experience and interpret the world” (Moen, 2006; p.63).
Ethics and the role of the researcher

Due to the ethnographic nature of the study, my role as researcher needed total transparency and a careful ethical approach to overcome any preconceptions I might hold of the situation under consideration (Spindler and Spindler, 1982). Studies conducted by a practitioner researching within their own profession or setting is often known as insider research, and whilst such a position can offer advantages in terms, for example, of access to participants, a number of issues need to be carefully considered and handled. According to Mercer (2007), these include “the power relationships within which the researcher and the researched co-exist; the personalities of the researcher and specific informants; and even the precise topic under discussion” (p.3), and which can affect the whole research process, from choice of research site to interpretation of data (Hockey, 1993).

The tradition of practitioner research emphasises the need for total transparency over the role of the researcher and a degree of reflexivity at all stages of the process, from the design of the methodology to the interpretation and presentation of the data. Reflexivity refers to the capacity to identify one’s own personal values and experiences and reflect on how these may impact upon the integrity of the research (Seale, 1998), and thereby limit the risk of personal bias within the study. This transparency was achieved in the LITP in two ways. Firstly, a reflexive stance was adopted in order to recognise and acknowledge my positioning within the study at all stages of the research: in the planning, the conducting and the reporting. This reflexivity has allowed me to reflect critically on my own background and personal values, particularly in terms of how these may affect both my collection and interpretation of data (Polit and Tatano Beck, 2009). Such an approach is particularly important in an ethnographic case study, and can enhance confidence in qualitative research and the credibility of the researcher (Patton, 2002). As I am a member of staff and
thus embedded in the organisation where the research took place, the need for reflexivity was amplified, not only by the methodological approach taken but by the nature of insider research. Whilst I have not attempted to ignore the knowledge I have gained from my professional experiences at NCFE (and indeed, explicitly drew on this for the composite learner profiles used in Gregory 2013a), I have been careful to acknowledge the potential for researcher bias, such as in the transparency over my position as a teacher of A-Level students with little professional contact with vocational learners. In this respect, it is important to note that whilst my position with regards to the A-Level directorate was that of an insider, I considered myself an outsider within the context of the BTEC provision, and indeed, my three pilot studies drew upon my role as an A-Level teacher by only looking at this form of provision. Thus when the study expanded to include vocational learners, I needed to question my own position with regards to participants through the “conscious revelation of the role of the beliefs and values held by researchers in the selection of research methodology for the generation of knowledge and its production as a research account” (Shacklock and Smyth, 1998). Regular meetings with my doctoral supervisor ensured I continually reflected upon such issues and questioned any existing assumptions and values I was carrying, and I also kept a notebook in which I recorded our discussions and my subsequent actions. Much practitioner research has made use of research diaries (see, for example, Arber 2006; Walker et al 2013), and whilst I chose not to keep a full journal, my notes provided a means of tracking the development of my research and of reflecting upon my own position in the study, and have contributed to the thought processes and decisions detailed in this chapter.

Secondly, recruitment for both stages of data collection – student interviews and staff focus group – was conducted anonymously. There was a statistically high chance that some of the interviewees would be known participants to me as members of my A-Level teaching groups (as proved to be the case), and all five members of the staff focus group were known to me.
as colleagues. It was made clear to participants both during the recruitment process and at the start of each interview and of the focus group that my role during this process was purely that of researcher for the University of Manchester, not as a teacher or a colleague, and that responses would not be judged in any personal capacity but instead used anonymously for the sole purpose of addressing my stated research questions with care taken to ensure that no participant, student or staff, would be identifiable. Participants for both the interviews and the focus group were recruited through an agent as detailed below (see Appendices 2 and 13), and were provided with an information sheet giving full details of the study before committing to take part (see Appendices 3 and 14) by signing a consent form (see Appendices 4 and 15). These processes are all considered during the course of this chapter.

**Use of narrative student interviews**

*Design of the Interview Schedule*

Interviews with 24 students at NCFE were used as my main method of data collection, chosen due to their time-efficient nature and the opportunity they provide to access participants within their normal college context and allow them to express themselves in their own words. The interview schedule consisted of three questions (see Appendices 7 and 8), which aimed to provide answers to my first two research questions, with the final two research questions to be addressed through studying patterns across the data as a whole. This schedule drew heavily on the pilot interviews conducted during RP2 (Gregory, 2013a), which themselves were designed around the MERITS model, although the number of questions was reduced from six in the pilot study to just three, largely to reflect a move to a semi-structured rather than fully-structured process. This allowed me as interviewer to stay in control of the discussion whilst also allowing greater freedom of response to the participants – an important factor in answering my final two research questions by focusing
on the specific elements of the transition process each interviewee chose to raise and the language each selected in narrating their academic experiences. A number of prompts were also included within the schedule to elicit further information for each question if not naturally forthcoming from the respondent. These were based around some of the questions cut from the pilot interview schedule and ideas suggested during a focus group conducted with other learners at NCFE prior to the start of the main fieldwork. The data collected through this focus group does not form a dataset in its own right, and was conducted as a means of moving the interview schedule used during the pilot study to a form that would allow me to address the research aims in the current study, as explained below.

Powell and Single (1996) define a focus group as “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (p.499). This stage was added to the design of the interview schedule as, despite drawing upon both theory and data as well as my experience as a practitioner, the interview schedule utilised in RP2 (Gregory, 2013a) was designed solely by me. Thus the use of a focus group allowed me to draw upon perspectives other than my own and also introduced an element of students-as-researchers tradition in my study (see, for example, Thomson and Gunter, 2007), an important move in recent research that reflects a greater focus on consulting children and young people on subjects which directly affect them whilst acknowledging that they “are in a dialectical relationship with other people and also with cultural and historical contexts” (Greig et al, 2007; p.45). This focus group was conducted in an A2 tutorial session with students approaching the end of their A-Level studies and who therefore had no possibility of taking part in the main fieldwork, and as their contribution was to the design of the interview schedule rather than to the empirical data collected in the study, no student details or identifiers are provided here. The class was divided into four groups and asked to construct a list of questions they would like to have been asked had they been interviewed during the first term of their AS year about their
experiences of moving from school to college. Ethical issues were minimised by running the focus group as a pedagogical session as part of the normal pastoral curriculum, and although due to ease of access the focus group was conducted with A-Level students only, the group were encouraged to develop the skill of empathy in considering whether the questions they had written would apply equally to BTEC students, and how they could be modified if not, thus maintaining the reflexive stance adopted in my role as practitioner researcher.

The questions written by the four groups of students shared some commonality, and were amalgamated into one set of questions that was then taken back to the group the following week for approval and clarification. Students identified a number of areas for discussion already covered by the interview schedule used in RP2 (Gregory, 2013a) and the questionnaire utilised in RP3 (Gregory, 2013b), such as the differences between GCSEs and A-Levels in terms of workload and expectations of private study. However, the groups focused on a number of areas I had not previously considered, such as study and leisure facilities, the structure of the college day (whereby students have fewer hours in the classroom and a greater number of independent study periods) and how and where they had made new friends. This suggested that students making the transition from school to college are just as concerned about social and environmental aspects of college as they are about academic change and progression. Some groups also included questions about managing finances and travel arrangements, indicating that moving from secondary school to college requires a new level of independence and maturity in other fields besides academic growth. Not all of these ideas could be incorporated into an interview schedule for a 30 minute time slot, but I did add in some extra prompts to reflect some of their concerns (“What were you most looking forward to about starting college?”; “How do you spend your time at college when you are not in class?”; “Is there anything about your experience of moving from school
to college you would change if you could”) and also gained a greater understanding of the range of points participants might bring up during the interview process.

**Sampling and Recruitment Process for Student Interviews**

The population of the study in its very broadest terms can be defined as learners aged 16-19 studying on a level three programme within the English schooling system, although as my research is limited to one site the available population was restricted to students at NCFE. Verbal and written permission to conduct research in the setting had already been gained from the college principal before the pilot fieldwork, but a further meeting with the principal to discuss access to both students and staff ensured continued approval of the project. The sample size was a crucial part in determining the defensibility or otherwise of the LITP, and thus I chose to interview a substantial sample of participants (24) in order to fulfil my aim of examining whether particular patterns and groupings exist amongst level three college students. The relatively large-scale nature of this study has allowed me to produce an important contribution to the issue of individual identity by capitalising on the wide range of participants who took part, as shown in Table 5.1 below.
Table 5.1: Interview Participant Details and Identifier

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Identifier</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Chosen Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student G</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student H</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student I</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS (resitting year after failing AS exams the previous year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student J</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student K</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student L</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in Sport &amp; Fitness plus one A-Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in Sport &amp; Fitness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>BTEC in ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BTEC in ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>BTEC in Childcare &amp; Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>BTEC in Childcare &amp; Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>BTEC in Childcare &amp; Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All potential participants were enrolled at NCFE, although I restricted this to learners aged 16-19 currently enrolled on the first year of A-Levels or a level three BTEC. I advertised for participants rather than send out an indiscriminate mailing shot, and designed a recruitment poster (see Appendix 1) that was displayed around all areas of NCFE from September 2014 to attract volunteers. I emailed all staff with details of the project requesting they mention it to their student groups, and appointed one of my teaching colleagues as agent, a strategy trialled previously as part of the pilot studies (Gregory, 2013a). This agent acted as a go-between, to ensure students did not feel pressurised to participate in the study, and to avoid potential researcher bias in the selection of known participants from the volunteers. The agent was fully briefed on the process, in which potential participants emailed her to express
their interest; she picked from these at random, with the only criteria being that all interviewees should be on a level three programme of study and split evenly into 12 A-Level students and 12 BTEC students. These participants were then sent an email by the agent (Appendix 2), an information sheet (Appendix 3), and asked to confirm their continued willingness to participate. Only at this point were their details forwarded to me, so that I could arrange a convenient interview slot for each student. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 4), and was allocated an anonymised identifier as shown in Table 5.1 above. This table also identifies each student’s programme of study along with their sex, included here to show the mix of participants rather than as a factor for consideration during the analysis. I began interviewing before all 24 volunteers had been recruited, so in practice a snowball effect was created in the sampling process, with earlier participants who had enjoyed taking part recommending friends to contact the agent to express their interest.

**Conduct of student interviews**

Each student participant agreed a convenient time and date for their interview with me via email, for which I booked a classroom for the duration of the half hour slot to ensure potential interruptions were kept to a minimum. Several different rooms were used depending upon availability, but all those used were in the same part of the college, in one of the few buildings at NCFE used by both A-Level and vocational students and therefore familiar to both groups as part of their normal routine. At the start of each interview I reiterated the main aims of the study and my own position as researcher rather than teacher for the duration of the process, as a means of mitigating a potential sense of power hierarchy within the discussion and encouraging participants to speak freely. Each interview was recorded on a password-protected tablet and then labelled with the participant’s anonymous identifier; once the recordings had been transcribed, each of these was deleted. I took brief notes during the interviews for each of the three questions in the schedule; these were also destroyed once
the full transcription had taken place. During the interviews I tried to speak as little as possible, asking each of the three questions and only using the prompts where required. At the end of the interview, I thanked each participant for their time and for taking part. The resulting transcripts of the learner narratives were then analysed thematically and linguistically as detailed below.

Use of interviews as part of the narrative tradition

Narratives, defined by Riessman (2005) as texts “which have in common a storied form”, where “events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience” (p.1), are now a common method of data collection, as Andrews et al (2008) identify: “in the last two decades, narrative has acquired an increasingly high profile in social research” (p.1). Despite this popularity, much of the literature on the subject highlights the potential complications in adopting this approach to research. Czarniawska (2004: p.5) notes that “in order to understand their own lives people put them into narrative form” – in other words, to make sense of our own experiences, we turn them into stories that may be shared with others. Of course, the process of converting life experiences into narrative is not necessarily a straightforward one: Czarniawska, calling upon the work of Davies and Harre (1991), goes on to point out “we are never the sole authors of our own narratives; in every conversation a positioning takes place which is accepted, rejected or improved upon by the partners in the conversation” (Czarniawska: 2004, p.5). It is this relationship between the individual’s own sense of identity and agency and the structures, both social and institutional, within which they must operate that specifically interests me about the use of narrative as a research method.
This idea is taken up by Moen (2006), who argues the use of narrative allows the researcher to "examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur" (p.56). She draws heavily upon a social constructivist approach which she summarises as a belief that “human beings learn and develop in these mutual processes between the individual and society” (p.57), and makes particular use of the work of Vygotsky (1978) and his ideas of developmental analysis – that “how people become what they are thus depends on what they have experienced in the social contexts in which they have participated” (p.57). To me, this approach only appears to offer a partial understanding of how individuals might experience and narrate academic transition, as it fails to explain why students from the same school environment and similar family backgrounds might choose alternate academic pathways and undergo different experiences of transition. However, the narrative approach adopted in the LITP has been specifically designed to allow learners to discuss their experiences in their own words, and prompt them to consider where exactly their motivations and experiences have come from. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) draw on the ideas of Dewey and his work on the nature of experience, which he felt to be both personal and social; in other words, whilst an individual must always be considered as such, they will by necessity always be part of a particular social context (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000; p.2). Thus, narrative allows us to understand “the continuity and wholeness of an individual’s life experience” (p.17), with “continuity” being Dewey’s notion that experiences are not isolated phenomena but instead grow from other experiences previously undergone by that individual, and in turn lead on to future, related experiences. Viewed from this angle, all experiences – including academic transition - become an integral part of an individual’s identity, and justify my decision to use narrative interviews as the most effective means of capturing and recording these experiences.
Analysis of learner narratives

The ability to place a clear, coherent structure on narratives is vital if the researcher is to counteract what Andrews et al (2008) identify as one of the complicating factors in a narrative approach, where “there are no self-evident categories on which to focus as there are with content-based thematic approaches” (p.1). Riessman (2005) echoes this sentiment, pointing out that although approaches to narrative research vary enormously, the researcher must be very clear in how they have made sense of the material they have collected, because “narratives do not speak for themselves or have unanalysed merit; they require interpretation when used as data in social research” (p.2). The use of the MERITS Plus model as a means of interpreting the narratives means that despite the lack of “self-evident categories on which to focus” (Andrews et al, 2008; p.1), I was able to conduct a thematic analysis of the data. The learner narratives were transcribed in full, and then highlighted using the MERITS Plus model, whereby those sections of each interview pertaining to motivations, expectations, reality, identity or transition were identified using different colours as shown in Appendix 9. In order to handle such a large amount of qualitative data, these individual transcripts were then summarised as shown in Appendix 10, with notes made under headings relating to each of the first five elements of the MERITS Plus model. I then sought recurring themes under each of these five headings and highlighted them manually using different colours, thus allowing identification of patterns across the narratives for each section.

Riessman (2005) identifies thematic, structural, interactional or performative as methods of analysing spoken data, although the analysis of qualitative data is rarely so clear-cut: “in practice, different approaches can be combined; they are not mutually exclusive and, as with all typologies, boundaries are fuzzy” (p.2). Due to the presence of these fuzzy boundaries, I wanted to go beyond thematic codification and look at the individual words used by the
learners; if language exists to “support the performance of social activities and social
identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups, and institutions”
(Gee: 2005, p.1), then it is particularly pertinent to my third and fourth research questions to
consider whether the language choices selected in the narratives by each learner do indeed
reflect any cultural or social affiliation. Gee (2005) defines the “social identities” mentioned
here as “different ways of participating in different sorts of social groups, cultures and
institutions, for example ways of being a ‘good student’” (p1), an idea to which I return in my
discussion of my findings in the next chapter. Whilst the LITP does not claim to attempt a full
linguistic analysis, I wanted to ensure the narrative data was handled as
“discourse…language viewed in a certain way, as part of the social process” (Fairclough,
2015; p.7). Thus, I conducted a second wave of analysis on the learner narratives, looking
for words that were used frequently and eventually identifying six words that appeared
significant across the narratives in terms of expressing the transition process: freedom,
independence, confidence, maturity, practical and preparation (see Appendix 10). I noted
whether these words were used with greater frequency by one of the groups of learners over
the other, and whether words appeared to have different meanings for different learners
within the context of the narratives in which they were used. A full discussion of each of the
six words is presented in Chapter Seven, which also discusses some of the anomalies
raised by the thematic and linguistic analyses through the lens of Bourdieu’s thinking tools.
These tools were used during a final wave of analysis conducted on the data collected in the
learner interviews and the staff focus group, as shown in Appendix 17.

Use of composite learner profiles

As well as undertaking a thematic and linguistic analysis of the learner narratives using the
MERITS Plus model, I also created eight composite profiles, drawn directly from the data as
a means of illustrating the range of positioning within the individual narratives. In creating
fictionalised accounts based on the data collected through the student interviews, my
research draws upon an increasingly popular tradition of reportage through fictionalised narrative. Clough (2002) comments:

> the fictionalisation of educational experience offers researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness – thus providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happenings (p.8).

My own reasons for adopting this approach are twofold. Firstly, the commitment to real happenings identified here reflects my own interest in ethnography and the importance of understanding events and processes in real life contexts. Secondly, fictionalising elements of the learner narratives allows the recognition of those learners as individuals who nevertheless share aspects of their identity with others. The use of composite profiles draws upon the work of Thomson (2002), who was one of the first to use “some writerly devices that are not conventionally found in studies of this kind” (p.xiv), and whilst my area of research interest differs from Thomson’s focus upon the effect of poverty and disadvantage, I have been much influenced by her methodological approach. She summarises this approach as “based in a view of research as writing…and the production of knowledge as occurring in and through language”, subjecting the data collected to “a range of narrative analyses…discourse analyses…and deconstructions” (p.xiii). For the LITP, the most influential of these “writerly devices” is the invention of:

> two hypothetical children. They do not exist, but they are not simply fiction: these stories are grounded in my research and they carry the theorisation of the production of educational disadvantage that underpins the remainder of the book (p.xiv).

I have adopted this approach in compiling a number of “hypothetical” students, mitigating the issue of validity in the use of this method through careful use of the original learner narratives in order to ensure the stories are, like Thomson’s, “grounded in my research”. Whilst the composite profiles are fictions by necessity, drawing as they do on a number of different individuals to create a hypothetical whole, the data itself has not been fictionalised, as each composite has been formed entirely from the stories and experiences presented during the learner narratives and using the participants’ own words where possible. The beginning of this process can be seen in Appendix 10. The first three elements of the
MERITS Plus model were used to help understand the different perspectives presented in the narratives and create the composite profiles, as by identifying the different motivations, experiences and realities expressed in each interview transcript I was able to synthesise these individual views into stories illustrating the relationship between the transition process and identity across the sample; thus the stories “carry the theorisation” (Thomson, 2002; p.xiv) of the study. A worked example is provided in Appendix 11 to demonstrate the process in full, with the eight resulting composite profiles in Appendix 12.

**Use of staff focus group**

*Design and recruitment of focus group*

A focus group with staff members at NCFE formed the final stage of the research process and was used to test and discuss the composite profiles created from the student narratives. A group interview was initially considered, but as one of the key components of a focus group is interaction between participants (Kitzinger 1995; Morgan 1997) who have first-hand experience of a particular topic, this approach was selected rather than a question and answer format between researcher and participants in order to place more emphasis on the views of the group members rather than the researcher and to observe the dynamics of their discussion. I had also considered “checking with informants that the interpretation by the researchers matches the respondents’ understanding of what was said” (Greig et al, 2007; p.75) by conducting a focus group or follow-up interviews with students who had been interviewed, but decided they would lack the overview needed to be able to comment meaningfully on whether the composite profiles accurately represented the range of learner types at NCFE. Instead, five members of staff took part in a focus group as detailed in Table 5.2 below.
According to Macnaghten and Myers (2004), “focus group researchers do not aim for a representative sample of a population; they try to generate talk that will extend the range of our thinking about an issue, and to do that they recruit groups that are defined in relation to the particular conceptual framework of the study” (p.68). For this reason, rather than attempt to recruit members of staff to represent all the different qualifications available at NCFE, a decision was made to invite teachers who deliver either A-Levels or BTECs or a combination of the two so that their experience was directly relevant to the case under investigation. These potential participants were approached via an email sent out to all teaching staff on my behalf via one of the college administrators and recruited through the same agent process detailed above, to avoid undue pressure to take part (see Appendices 13 and 14). Five participants were chosen as, although this number represents the lower end of what is generally considered appropriate for a focus group, any more than this would make discussion of eight different composite profiles both difficult to manage and time-consuming. The use of a staff focus group within my own setting meant that I was known to all potential participants as a colleague, a fact which was helpful in terms of convenient access to participants willing to help with the research but which requires careful consideration of my role. However, NCFE employs such a large number of teaching staff that in practice, three of the focus group were known to me by name only, and the remaining two had never worked with me directly. This removed any potential for participants being aware of any personal views I held on the research topic, and meant power relationships were not an issue as none of the participants was directly answerable to each other or to me in the workplace, and each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Identifier</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Teacher of A-Level, BTEC or both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>BTEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>BTEC (had taught A-Level previously at a different college)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A-Level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
held the same rank within the organisation. In any case, as explained below, my role in the
discussion was minimal.

**Conduct of focus group and analysis of data**

Once the five participants had confirmed they were happy to take part, a time was agreed for
an hour-long focus group to take place in a classroom during normal college hours, and the
eight draft composite learner profiles were emailed to the participants on the understanding
these were to remain confidential. All confirmed their understanding of the confidential
nature of the profiles, and as all participants were based in different areas of the college,
there was no opportunity for them to discuss them informally with each other or with me. At
the start of the focus group I clarified the key information about the study and its aims, and
asked the participants to begin by discussing their thoughts of the composite profiles; I did
not need to speak again, as the participants discussed the profiles and how they related to
their own experiences without prompting for the duration of the hour. I audio-recorded and
took notes during the session, and subsequently transcribed the discussion in full before
destroying the original notes and recording. At the end of the hour, I drew the discussion to a
close and thanked the participants for taking part.

The analysis of the transcript from the focus group was approached in a slightly different way
to the interview data, as the purpose was to explore the validity of the composite learner
profiles within a real-life educational context with some of the professionals teaching at
NCFE. Analysis centred around the group members’ discussion of the different learner types
and their experiences of teaching such individuals, particularly where their comments
illuminated the themes and ideas raised by the learners in their individual narratives. As the
composite profiles had been created around the motivations, expectations and reality
elements of the MERITS Plus model, many of the ideas prompted by the discussion of the
profiles related to those raised by the learners in their narratives, as shown in Appendix 16. The implications of these ideas were then considered through the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools, as demonstrated in Appendix 17.

This chapter has described and justified the methodological approach taken in the LITP, explained the research methods adopted and how they have been designed and implemented, and addressed issues of ethics and insider research. The remaining chapters of this thesis focus on the presentation and interpretation of the data collected in the student interviews and staff focus group. The next chapter presents a thematic analysis of the learner narratives, before outlining some of the issues and anomalies identified during this process through the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools. Chapter Seven then offers a discussion of the six key words identified in the linguistic analysis of the learner narratives, and how these and the thematic analysis helped create the eight learner profiles that were discussed during the staff focus group. The findings here are once again analysed with a particular focus on Bourdieu’s thinking tools. The final two chapters aim to draw these different layers of analysis together by revisiting the MERITS Plus model in Chapter Eight before summarising the research’s main findings and their implications in Chapter Nine.
Chapter Six: Thematic Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents extracts from the learner narratives, as well as offering a thematic analysis of the interview data through the MERITS framework. The first five elements of the model – Motivations, Expectations, Reality, Identity and Transition – are used as subheadings in order to address the first three of my research questions, thereby allowing me to present learner espoused reasons, expectations and experiences of reality across both cohorts, as well as identifying participant perception of the actuality of the transition process and its effect on their individual identities. The final element of the model, Stories and Synthesis, is reflected in the composite learner profiles discussed in Chapter Seven.

The use of the model to identify thematic patterns across the data has allowed the process of what Miles and Huberman (1994) call “data reduction”, by cutting out any irrelevant data from the interview transcripts and permitting me to focus on commonalities, differences, themes and exceptions within the narratives. By adopting this approach, there is a danger that the data itself will not be given due prominence or attention. This is addressed through the inclusion of direct quotation from the narratives, where the learners’ words are presented without intervention, although the nature of my study means that the focus is less upon the trajectories of individual young people and more upon group identities. Thus, the thematic analysis presented in this chapter looks for repeated ideas within the data, reflecting my interest in whether learners on different academic pathways express common ideas within their narratives, or whether similar patterns exist across the two cohorts regardless of educational choices. The chapter closes by acknowledging some of the issues and complexities raised by the thematic analysis of the data, and discusses the use of the final stage of the MERITS Plus model – a layer of Bourdeusian analysis - to begin addressing these.
Thematic Analysis Using the MERITS Framework

Motivations

This section considers learner espoused reasons for selecting their programme of study, and what impact this first stage of the academic transition process has had on each participant’s sense of identity, thereby addressing the first of my research questions. The first question in the interview schedule was deliberately left open so that participants could focus on any reason for selecting their chosen pathway: “Why did you choose to study a full-time (A-Level/BTEC) programme, as opposed to: a/ another level three programme such as (A-Level or BTEC) and b/ looking for employment/an apprenticeship?” However, learners from both cohorts largely chose to focus on extrinsic reasons for their decisions, often linked to the (sometimes negative) external perceptions of their course. Five of the twelve vocational respondents showed an awareness that their BTEC course may not be perceived by others as being equivalent to A-Levels, with Student 1 saying “there’s nothing wrong with doing a BTEC” although they’re “seen as not as good”, and Student 5 (who had originally chosen the A-Level pathway before switching to a BTEC in ICT after two weeks) commenting that doing well at school followed by A-Levels and then university was the “set standard” (although, as this chapter will discuss, this “set standard” appears to be changing somewhat). Student 9 referenced similar ideas but originating from his parents, who felt that “BTECs didn’t seem as good…what’s the point in going to college if you don’t do A-Levels?”, and went on to say that BTECs seemed “a bit of a cop-out” as “people think they are easier and not an equivalent [to A-Levels]”.

This sentiment was echoed by the A-Level participants, who largely expressed their reasons for choosing their course either based on a future life goal such as university or in terms of other people’s perceptions of their academic ability. Students A and B were unusual in their espousal of more intrinsic motivations, such as looking forward to learning new things and
“getting better at languages”, with three more students espousing knowledge- or skills-based reasons for their choice of course such as developing the “analytical skills needed” for a career in Psychology (Student F) or keeping their options option for future career paths by the ability to select four different subjects at A-Level (Students H and J). However, the remaining seven participants stated they had been explicitly advised by external actors such as parents and teachers that the A-Level route was a better choice for students with particular academic ability or ambitions. Student K was the most explicit in her discussion of this area – her boss at her part-time job had said that “BTECs weren’t as clever” and that she’d “be wasted on them”, and her parents had “pushed” her to study A-Levels as they are “academic” and “more recognised as a qualification in the world”. Student B’s parents “preferred A-Levels” as they would give her “a better chance”, Student C’s likewise as they “never had the opportunity”, whilst Student I’s also preferred her to do A-Levels as the “better option” and Student L’s parents said “A-Levels would be good – I’m able to do it so I should”. The vague language used here (“better”, “good”) suggests that parents – perhaps the most influential adult role model in a young person’s life – do not themselves have a clear understanding of why they are recommending this particular pathway other than a general notion of A-Levels being perceived more favourably by society; the fact remains, however, that a message of desirability is being clearly communicated to learners considering their academic options. This raises interesting questions over what exactly this sense of desirability may be based on, a point considered further in the discussion of findings later in this chapter.

Student K in particular had begun to espouse these reasons as her own, making it clear that she didn’t see BTECs as an equivalent – “it sounds really bad but I see BTECs as more a practical thing…A-Levels will get me further”. This twin external motivator of A-Levels being perceived and recommended as more appropriate for students likely to do well in their GCSEs and as a better option for going on to further study was reflected in many of the A-Level narratives, with ten of the 12 interviewees citing a desire to go to university as a key reason
for choosing A-Levels ("and obviously you need A-Levels for that" – student K) and the remaining two inferring this through discussion of a career aim that required a level 6 qualification. Interestingly, this assumption is not borne out by the setting in which the research took place – NCFE has seen a greater percentage of its alumni going on to university with a level 3 BTEC rather than A-Levels in the last three years (Northlands College, 2014, 2015, 2016b). However, NCFE does arguably reinforce the assumption that A-Levels are a more suitable pathway for students with high GCSE grades through its promotion of differing entry requirements for the two pathways, which currently stand at five GCSEs at grade A*-C for level three BTEC programmes but six (including at least two Bs) for the A-Level equivalent (Northlands College, 2016a). The data suggests this message is being confirmed by secondary school teachers who, along with parents, emerged from the learner narratives as a key influence in making academic choices, particularly in the recommendation of the A-Level route for students with strong academic records: "the teachers said I was a really bright girl and assumed that A-Levels would be my next step" (Student G); "[my parents] pushed me to study A-Levels as they are academic and more recognised as a qualification in the world" (Student K). Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned any form of careers guidance at school playing a part in their choice, perhaps reflecting the impact of funding cuts in this area through – for example – the closure of many Connexions careers advice centres in recent years (ICG, 2011).

Whilst all A-Level participants spoke of a desire to go to university as a motivating factor in their choice of course, almost as many of the vocational students were planning or considering doing the same. Five of the 12 interviewees stated that they wanted to go on to undergraduate study, with a further five considering the possibility, and there was a clear sense that studying a BTEC could be advantageous both in HE and in the workplace. Student 1 felt that A-Levels were "too theoretical" to adequately prepare him for a career in sport and that college was "the next step in becoming a professional and thinking about the future", whilst Student 4 had
specifically chosen a BTEC in ICT as “better preparation” for studying this subject at university thanks to the more “in-depth knowledge” this route provided. Student 7, also an ICT student, was clear that he wanted to go straight into work as “uni is too expensive and too much of a hassle”, and felt that as “everything in the future will be run by computer” he had made the right choice of college course, whilst Student 4 stated being able to select a specialised pathway within his IT BTEC “opens the door wider for going into an organisation with more skills”. These findings seem to contradict existing research suggesting vocational learners have lower expectations than their more “academic” counterparts, such as Fuller and Macfadyen’s (2011) findings that from a cohort of 40 vocational students across two FE colleges, only two had any aspiration to go on to HE. Whilst this study is not entirely comparable to my own as the learners were studying on a variety of courses, the positive identification of future goals amongst the LITP’s participants suggests a change in the way in which vocational learners perceive and narrate their skills, abilities and chances of success.

Three of the participants were studying for a BTEC in Childcare and Education, which requires learners to spend alternate weeks in college and on compulsory placement. Whilst the placement element of this type of course can be perceived as aiming to “develop certain dispositions and demeanour” (Colley et al, 2007; p.482) through “signature pedagogies…types of teaching that organise the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (Shulman, 2005; p.52) as part of “becoming” a childcare practitioner, two of the three were considering university and all three spoke of the confidence they had developed through both the course and its accompanying placement, with Student 12 particularly vocal on this subject. She had “loved” the structure of being on placement every other week as it had meant the course was “not all work work work”, and spoke very positively about the confidence she had gained from working with new children on a regular basis. Whilst this type of course remains anchored in the workplace, the notion of “vocational habitus” appears to have taken on a more positive meaning for the learners in
The LITP studying vocational qualifications within an applied general context, seen as equipping them for a future in which they can choose either to go to university or straight into the workplace armed with the skills required to attain any number of good jobs, and perhaps reflecting the number of different routes now available to enter HE – following a vocational pathway was seen as a chance to get to university in these learner narratives rather than the opposite. Even Student 9, who only enrolled for a BTEC as he “had nowhere else to go” after failing the first year of A-Level, had developed a more positive mindset during the course – when he started he “didn’t care” and didn’t even think he’d complete the course, but was now considering a future that included studying ICT at university.

Expectations

The following section examines the ideas and attitudes held by the participants on entry to NCFE and considers the factors that had influenced these ideas, thereby addressing the second of my research questions by asking “what were your expectations of studying (A-Levels/BTEC) in college?” There was some commonality of response across both cohorts to this question, with the majority of learners recognising that their level three course represented a clear step-up from GCSEs in the standard of work required and therefore in their academic skill. However, the BTEC students appeared more flexible in their interpretation of what exactly this next stage of their education might encompass, whilst the A-Level participants adopted very similar terminology in their narratives, with nine of the twelve simply expressing a blanket opinion that their chosen course would be “harder” or “more difficult”. When prompted to explain, the idea of having to work more independently than at school was an almost constant presence in the narratives, with eight of the A-Level cohort using this term (and three of them specifically contrasting it to the “spoon feeding” of information provided by teachers at secondary school). The concept of “independence” and what it might mean to individual learners is discussed further in Chapter 7, but the A-Level
narratives indicated that, for many, this new challenge was a source of worry rather than something to be excited about: Student C had seen her brother “go from getting As at GCSE to Us at A-Level” and was worried she wouldn’t be able to handle the amount of work, whilst Student D echoed this concern and thought that A-Levels might be “really overwhelming”. Student G expected not to get any help from teachers and to have to “get [her] head down from the beginning”, whilst Student J’s older friends had told her that “A-Levels would be majorly challenging” and “a massive kick up the bum”. Student L, like Student C, had been warned by an older sibling and also by her teachers to expect “a big jump from GCSEs to A-Levels”; Student K’s cousins had passed on a similar message, suggesting the influence of family and teachers in transmitting opinions that the A-Level students then adopted as part of their own narratives in order to reinforce their position as the more academic learners.

By contrast, only one of the BTEC cohort used the word “harder” to define their expectations of their chosen course, with one further participant expecting it to be “tough”. Instead, there was a pervading sense of embarking upon a course that would be more suited to their learning needs and styles than the GCSEs they had undertaken at school, with one commenting he was “excited” at the thought of managing his own workload and that he expected his college course to be “better than school”, and another saying she expected college to be “welcoming” and the BTEC to be “more enjoyable” than her GCSEs. Much of the enthusiasm across the cohort appeared to be directly linked to the expectation of a more practical, “hands on” style of learning with fewer exams, and the ability to study the subject of their choice in depth. This resonates with the vocational learners interviewed in Fuller and Macfadyen’s (2012) study, where “students were keen to emphasise a view of themselves as a ‘different type of learner’, a learner much better suited to college and the courses they have chosen” (p.96).
These examples characterise the two cohorts in their general expectations of their chosen course, with a clearer sense of nervousness that the work would be too demanding espoused during the narratives of the A-Level learners compared to the excitement expressed by the BTEC students, suggesting the academic pressure had been removed from the vocational cohort once their pathway had been selected. The commonality of response to this question from the A-Level cohort suggests that they had bought into a particular Discourse model (Gee, 2005) of what it means to be an A-Level student operating in a college environment, believing in “simplified, often unconscious and taken-for-granted, theories about how the world works…these experiences are shaped and normed by the social and cultural groups to which we belong” (Gee, 2005; p.71). In other words, their relative academic strength in the school environment had led them to perceive that the qualification they had selected was by very definition the more challenging of the two pathways available (and thus, by implication, the more desirable). Their narratives re-enact one of the existing stories already out there (Andrews et al, 2004) – that of the successful, academic learner who has flourished in the schooling system and who is embarking upon level three study as stepping stone to further academic success – and by constructing and recounting this for an audience they are in some sense both reflecting and reproducing the social values to which they have been exposed.

This raises the question of how to conceptualise what it means to be an A-Level student, and where this conceptualisation comes from. The frequency of the A-Level participants’ claims to academic superiority adds weight to the idea that language choices are not “a product of individual choice, but a product of social differentiation – language varies according to the social identities of people in interactions” (Fairclough, 2015; p.54). These identities appear to stem from a combination of intrinsic belief and extrinsic approbation and endorsement from parents, teachers, educational institutions and the popular press (Gregory, 2012), with their narratives protecting and re-asserting this sense of identity by emphasising their differentness from the other group under consideration – in this case, those perceived as being on the less academic programme. Their similarity with others on the A-Level programme can only be
established by evoking differentiation and creating a boundary that both includes themselves and excludes others (Jenkins, 2004). For some, this goes beyond perceived academic ability to encompass levels of behaviour and maturity, with Student G commenting (unprompted) on the division at NCFE between A-Level and vocational students, having seen male students (“boys”) play-fighting in the Construction Centre and deciding “it looked like school”. If power is not permanent or undisputed (Fairclough, 2015), then “those who hold power at a particular moment have to constantly reassert their power” (p.94) – even if, like these young learners, this assertion may not always appear to be a conscious decision.

Interestingly, Fairclough (2015) posits that individuals lacking in power may decide to make a bid for it through their discourse, but this does not appear to be directly the case in the narratives provided by the vocational learners; instead, as suggested previously there appears to be almost a sense of freedom and relief at the different expectations now required from them in comparison with those on the A-Level pathway: “I was never good at doing tests…the BTEC workload is only hard if you don’t keep on top of it” (Student 11). It was also noticeable that the narratives of the vocational learners created Jenkins' (2004) notion of boundary not through criticism of, or negative comparisons with, the other group (in this case, the A-Level students) but through an emphasis on unifying factors such as personality and personal and professional interests within the cohort, suggesting Tajfel’s (1982) notion that “when the group suffers at the same time from low status in the society at large, the strength drawn by its members from its internal and positive social identity may come into conflict with the negative evaluations from ‘outside’” (p11). This focus on social cohesion was a key theme in the vocational narratives and is considered further in the section that follows, particularly in terms of how this and other aspects of the narratives may represent an indirect bid for power and recognition of capital by the vocational participants.
Reality, Identity and Transition

The third and final strand of thematic analysis links the Reality, Identity and Transition elements of the MERITS model, and identifies some of the ways in which learners recognise the practice of following a particular educational pathway as well as considering how the learners reveal their individual identities through their accounts of academic transition. These three elements of the MERITS model, whilst individually distinct, are used together here to specifically address the third of my research questions by considering the connections between these three elements of the model. In the interviews, participants were asked to “Please explain in your own words how your experience so far has measured up to these expectations”. Whilst a number of commonalities were identified in the data, most notably linked with the physical transition to college conferring benefits in terms of social and personal growth, the LITP also finds a great deal of diversity amongst each cohort, neither of which emerged as a homogenous group.

This was particularly true of the A-Level students, despite the similarities in how their individual narratives framed their understanding of their capital by accepting that A-Levels were the best way forward for “academic” students like themselves. NCFE has lower entry requirements for its A-Level programme than some other educational institutions (Northlands College, 2016a), and this is reflected in the broad spread of grades recorded each year and in the fact that a number of A-Level subjects do not have 100% pass rates despite the supposed suitability of entrants to the course. Thus, despite the participants’ evident sense of credentialing, they were actually in reality achieving varying levels of academic success and some – those failing to maintain the grades they had achieved at school - were effectively on the very edge of this particular game. Student I, resitting her AS year after failing her end of year exams, was very forthright about how she had underestimated the level of work required for an A-Level student to be successful and had changed her behaviour accordingly: she had “breezed through GCSEs” and thought she “could do the same at college…I took advantage and went for the
social side a bit too much. I was so naïve about it at first and didn’t understand the importance of working hard”. She admitted this had been “the wrong mentality” and that her first year results were “a shock…I realised I needed to step it up and work harder or I wouldn’t get into uni”. Three others had initially chosen to study A-Levels but had made the decision to drop out and enrol on a vocational course instead – a move that each narrated in very positive terms. For Student 9 the move to a BTEC had simply given him “another chance”, whilst for Students 5 and 6 the change of course was narrated in terms which very strongly emphasised the perceived benefits of the vocational pathway for “preparing for the future” (Student 5) and offering a “constant, hands-on, practical style of learning” rather than the “more theoretical A-Level, where they just teach you to pass an exam…you just regurgitate at the end of the year” (Student 6). In other words, far from simply being a second (and presumably last) chance, the change of course was espoused by these learners as a valuable move in terms of the future benefits it could confer. This aspect of the data also suggests that possessing strong grades at GCSE does not automatically make A-Levels the most suitable pathway for particular individuals, who might be better suited to vocational courses despite gaining the entry requirements for A-Levels.

Both learner cohorts elected to focus heavily on the social aspects of academic transition, but as has been suggested above, a sense of social cohesion was more apparent in the vocational programmes. This may of be a matter of practicality imposed by the structure of the qualification itself: A-Level students each study three or four subjects, and the size of NCFE means many of these learners will be in classes with different individuals throughout the day, whilst vocational learners have all their lessons with the other members of their tutor group and therefore spend their college week (or at least their eighteen timetabled hours) with those on the same course. The narratives themselves, however, suggested that this sense of collectivity amongst the vocational learners was more than just a result of the mechanics of the timetabling process, and that social cohesion is very much a part of the culture of studying a BTEC qualification in a particular subject: “some of my closest friends are from the
BTEC…they are much better than in high school. They include me – I don’t have to do much to be included” (Student 7). Student 11 even credited her new friendship group with a change of attitude and identity: “at the beginning I was a nightmare to tutors and could be rude…I was hanging around with the wrong people. Looking back this wasn’t very good. I’m glad I’ve changed – it’s all thanks to them [the rest of her group]”. That said, there was no indication in the narratives that BTEC students in a particular subject would mix with those from another subject area, suggesting that while vocational learners may espouse similar motivations and experiences of transition, they form a series of homogenous groupings linked to subject areas rather than one larger group comprised of all vocational students: “my BTEC group just clicked…I’ve still got friends from primary and secondary school too. The three groups don’t mix” (Student 5). Again, this diversity of positioning is reflected in the range of composite profiles presented in the chapter that follows.

Another aspect of social transition alluded to by both cohorts was their own perception that their identities had changed during the process, invariably for the better. This was most frequently expressed as an increased sense of maturity, of social confidence or in terms of new friendship groups that allowed them to be themselves. Student 3 commented he no longer felt nervous of “going into the big world”, and Student 4 – a leading member of the Student Action Group (SAG), a cross-college group of learners who meet weekly to represent learner voice – stressed that college was “not just about learning…others are surprised at my maturity and how much I’ve achieved at college…I’ve surprised myself as I would never have seen this in a crystal ball when I was at school”. This student also referred to the “huge change” of college as “like going up some huge steps”, echoing the “sense of progression” posited by Student F (also a member of the SAG), who emphasised he’d undergone “personal progression as well as academic” and now felt “good about himself”. Student F quantified this personal progression as a growing confidence thanks to more friends and more interaction with others than at school, becoming a little emotional and suggesting that such a process is “all part of growing up”. The frequently repeated terms “confidence” and “maturity” are
discussed as part of the linguistic analysis in the chapter that follows, but the high frequency of these words across all the narratives suggests that for many learners, the opportunities for physical and social change were at least as important as the potential benefits offered by their chosen qualification. This supports existing research (although much of this research relates to undergraduate study) that indicates this time of moving “from adolescence to adulthood” places “emphasis on social aspects [of university life] rather than academic achievement” (Kantanis, 2000; p.102), a trend that appears replicated amongst the LITP’s participants. Only Student A commented he missed school, although this was identified in the staff focus group as being a more common occurrence than the narratives suggest and is discussed further in Chapter 7. Student A was open about his reasons, saying he “feels sad inside that I will never go to school again...I miss the people and I really enjoyed being in lessons 9-3”, and going on to comment that “missing this lack of freedom may seem a bit surprising”. At the time of the interview, he had not made any new friends: “the college is full of established friendship groups so I’m friends with the four best friends I’ve had since primary school...they are not in my lessons but I see them on the bus after college”. Despite these apparent difficulties with social transition, Student A appeared to be relishing the academic transition offered by the move to college: “I am adapting to the new lifestyle – it’s my next stage of life. I do feel a bit different from them [his four friends from primary school] as I’m already doing better academically”, and agreed he had matured and become more independent.

Discussion of Findings

Overall, the data suggest that students on different academic pathways espouse both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for selecting their course, and form their expectations from similar sources. The influence of secondary school teachers and of family members, particularly parents, on the decision to study A-Levels was clear throughout the narratives, suggesting that a process of credentialing was at work before the learners had even made their choices – those who were predicted higher GCSE grades were encouraged to follow the more
academic route, indicating that this set of credentials “pre-qualifies” certain individuals for the opportunity of following the educational pathway most highly favoured by society. That some of these individuals – by their own admission – were finding the A-Level path more challenging than they had expected suggests that they were not actually necessarily equipped for this particular qualification, despite the view that as credentialed individuals they would be able to perform at the required level, supporting Tan’s (2015) suggestion that “expectations may be influenced by perceptions of their own prior academic ability and therefore serve as a proxy instead of predictor of their subsequent achievement levels” (p.1052). For some, though, the expectation that they would perform better than other, less credentialed individuals was clear in their narratives: Student K, who evidently believed it when she was told she’d be “wasted” on BTECs, is the most obvious example of this sense of entitlement that certain qualifications can bring.

The process of credentialing was also visible in the external motivators applied to many of the A-Level participants by parents or teachers indicating this qualification would be viewed more favourably by society. The espousal of this desirability raises interesting questions over where these ideas may have come from: vague perceptions of prestige perhaps, or recourse to what was valued by previous generations. It is beyond the scope of the LITP to examine the socioeconomic background of the participants, but a number of those who had chosen A-Levels volunteered that their parents had not themselves studied A-Levels or gone to university, thus indicating a desire on the part of these parents for social mobility for their children. This runs slightly counter to the idea of social reproduction in academic achievement, suggesting instead that the A-Level is seen by some as possessing its own form of value, building on the existing credentials already held by virtue of above-average GCSE results.
Despite the differences apparent in the espoused motivations for course choices, a consistent theme across both cohorts was the emphasis on social transition, which appeared just as important in the learner narratives as the process of academic transition – perhaps even more so when discussing the impact of transition upon individual identity, with participants speaking of new friendship groups that allowed them to be themselves. This suggests that institutional socialisation – whereby the students “learned” to be college students, with all the new friendship groups, routines and social practices that entails – is of greater significance in the transition process than the professional socialisation required to belong to a particular academic pathway. That said, there was a clear sense of the two different cohorts rarely mixing, instead selecting friends from within their own academic pathway, with the only exceptions being those learners belonging to the SAG, which draws its members from both A-Level and vocational courses. This point is considered further in the following chapter, suggesting as it does that whilst learners do seemingly align themselves with those perceived to demonstrate a similar habitus, some (but not all) learners are prepared to take advantage of college mechanisms encouraging and facilitating wider friendship groups.

**Issues Raised by Thematic Analysis and the Adoption of Bourdieu’s Thinking Tools**

This chapter has presented extracts from the narratives alongside a thematic analysis of the data through use of the five-element MERIT model originally conceived in the pilot studies. The use of such a framework in organising and presenting data necessitates a critical consideration of the model’s effectiveness, particularly as real-life data can be messy, and resist neat categorisation by throwing up anomalies and contradictions and refusing to be reduced to neat patterns. That said, whilst the use of such an analytical framework is by its very nature reductive, a horizontal analysis that looks for trends within the data is the most appropriate initial approach for a study whose interests lie primarily in the notion of collective
identity. Where the model is more limited is in perhaps concealing the anomalies thrown up by the data by aligning the overall patterns identified with existing literatures rather than allowing further exploration of individual cases and issues.

The questions thrown up by the thematic analysis can be helpfully addressed by adopting Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986) thinking tools. The clear focus in the narratives on the influence of parents and teachers supports existing studies which suggest how influential such figures are for students making decisions about their academic futures, with the school environment and parents and teachers playing as much of a role in this process as personal agency (e.g. NFER, 2015). However, the influence of parents and teachers was much less noticeable in the narratives of the BTEC students, and in terms of personal agency the vocational participants were better able to vocalise their intrinsic reasons for selecting their chosen course than the A-Level students, many of whom concentrated on the extrinsic benefits and perceptions of their academic pathway. This indicates that a different set of processes may be at work in the decisions made by the vocational cohort, and it is useful to consider the claim posited by Hodkinson (2008, reviewing his own earlier work on Careership theory) that decisions made about one’s future career draw upon three different dimensions: “the positions and dispositions of the individual, the relations between forces acting in the field(s) within which decisions were made and careers progressed, and the on-going longitudinal pathways the careers followed” (p4). Similarly, Fuller and Macfadyen (2012) comment that “whilst students explicitly discuss autonomy in ‘choosing’ a vocational course…how students identify themselves in terms of academic success or failure matters in relationship to the educational choices they then go on to make” (p.98). Bourdieu’s concept of disposition (1977) is therefore discussed in Chapter 7, along with a consideration of the field of 16-19 education and the types of games being played there.
The findings from the data suggest that there has been a shift in this field, despite the systems and structures adopted by educational institutions to recognise certain capitals and promote the A-Level game. Despite its status as an FE establishment, NCFE’s A-Level provision is delivered within a learning environment which frames this provision using the typical structures of its school equivalent – formal mock examinations in a purpose-built exams building, regular parents’ evenings and reports, target grades – which serve to reinforce to learners that in many ways an A-Level course is a continuation of the academic environment in which they have already thrived by promoting a particular academic discourse built around success in examinations (Northlands College, 2016a). However, the field of education is not autonomous, and is subject to heteronomous forces that do not themselves remain static but which change to reflect society’s priorities and attitudes at any given time. The doxa that the only course worth following is the A-Level programme is under threat from other doxas – as indicated by the increasing numbers of students entering university with a vocational qualification and the greater recognition afforded to vocational qualifications by employers. It can thus be argued that vocational learners, previously playing a game regarded as less valuable than its alternative, are now taking part in a game that is on the ascendency, creating a tension in the field as students whose capital is historically in deficit now attempt to get that capital recognised. One method in which vocational learners appear to bid for recognition is through promoting a sense of collective identity during their narratives, a pattern examined through their language choices in the chapter that follows. Similarly, linguistic analysis suggests that the new field these students have entered through their choice of college course appears to have given these learners the chance to change their identity to that of the successful student, thriving in the new educational environment and enforcing the notion that habitus has a “permanent capacity for invention” (Bourdieu, 2004; p.63). Whilst it seems to be the case that some of the vocational learners in the LITP chose their educational pathway at least partly based on an estimation of their academic ability, it appears equally true from the learner narratives that by changing their attitude to their chances of success at college, the BTEC students have actually moved past their supposed mass fate by achieving success in a
different way – a suggestion reflected in the range and variety of the composite learner profiles presented in Chapter 7. The question of whether a sense of collective identity is evident is amongst learners on a particular academic pathway requires an approach which reflects the complexity of the narratives and stories espoused during the collection of the empirical data and demonstrates the variety of identities within this one educational setting. I now move on to address these issues by adopting a Bourdeusian perspective to think more closely about the narratives and their implications.
Chapter Seven: Linguistic Analysis and Focus Group Findings

Introduction

This chapter builds on the thematic analysis of the preceding section by undertaking a linguistic analysis of key words used in the learner narratives, the significance of which is then considered through the lens of Bourdieu’s thinking tools. This chapter also reports findings from the staff focus group held within the setting to discuss the composite learner profiles created from the thematic and linguistic analyses of the student narratives (see Appendix 12). The chapter begins with a discussion of six specific words used repeatedly by the participants and which appeared key to their narration of their motivations, expectations and experiences: freedom, independence, confidence, maturity, practical and preparation. I then go on to consider whether these recurrent motifs appear to have different meanings for different learners, and if these linguistic choices provide evidence of the reinforcement and reflection of societal power relations and values through the language selected by each cohort. By doing so, this section focuses on the narratives as discourses by examining the forms of language used by each academic pathway, and the values they express. The chapter then moves on to the presentation of the data collected during the staff focus group, where five teachers at NCFE were invited to discuss the eight composite learner profiles created directly from the student narratives. These profiles were produced as a means of drawing together the individual narratives into collective stories representing the range of learner types in the setting, with the purpose of the focus group being to collect narratives from members of the teaching staff about how well the profiles represented the different types of student they had encountered during their professional practice.

This chapter thus adopts a more synoptic approach that represents the “stories and synthesis” element of the MERITS Plus model, by pulling together the thematic and linguistic
analyses of the learner narratives and the findings from the staff focus group into a coherent whole before considering their implications through the lens of Bourdieu’s thinking tools: disposition and habitus, fields, games and capital, and agency, structure and misrecognition. I have grouped these tools in this way in order to highlight key issues within the data, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the data under each of these three headings. This process has been undertaken as a method of addressing my fourth and final research question: how do students on different academic programmes narrate their educational experiences, and is a sense of collective identity evident amongst different cohorts? The fact that eight distinct learner “types” have emerged from the narratives indicates that the answer to this question is not straightforward. This chapter addresses these complexities and considers what we can learn from the data about individual learner identity and agency and its relationship with the educational structures within which it must operate.

**Linguistic Findings: Keyword Analysis**

“Freedom”

The word “freedom” (and specifically, “more” freedom) was used by 11 of the 24 participants as one of their expectations when transitioning from school to college. Of all the frequently repeated keywords, this term appeared to have the highest number of interpretations, with five different applications of the word within the narratives. The most common was the idea of physical freedom, with six participants (C, D, E, 4, 7, 12) talking about the ability to leave college premises during their lunch or study breaks. This was evenly split across both cohorts, suggesting that regardless which academic pathway the participants had selected, they held the expectation of more time outside of classroom environments and less monitoring of attendance and activities during non-contact hours – an idea which will be picked up again as part of the process of maturing. Similarly, the prediction that a college student would be
afforded more freedom to manage their own time and workload was split equally across the two pathways, with A, I, 1 and 5 all referring to this.

Elsewhere in the narratives, the concept of freedom was referred to more frequently by the A-Level students. The expectation of freedom to be oneself was espoused by two A-Level learners (J and K), with only student 5 from the vocational cohort talking of the possibility of being accepted for “being who he is”. Student K, along with E and I, also talked of freedom from rules and responsibilities, with student I adding that college also provided the freedom to “make mistakes”. This appears at odds with the idea that A-Level students who had previously done well in the examinations-based school environment would be advantaged by their aptitude for the systems and procedures in place within college, and suggests that this form of capital is not as beneficial in the new environment as might be expected.

For the vocational students, there was also an implied sense of freedom running throughout the narratives, but this time the sense of being released from an education system heavily weighted in favour of examination-based assessment in which they had generally failed to excel. Half of the BTEC participants said they did not thrive in examinations – “I’m not good at doing tests” (Student 11) – and the narratives as a whole expressed a collective sense of relief at selecting a pathway that offers continuous assessment and places greater value on the demonstration of skills favoured by employers in the workplace: “I don’t like exams…I prefer to do coursework and get it done there and then rather than stuffing just before an exam” (Student 5). This is discussed further in the analysis of the word “practical” later in this section.
“Independence”

This term (and its variants “independent” and “independently”) was used more frequently by the A-Level participants - eight raised this idea as opposed to only one of the BTEC students, with Student E using the term three times. This was predominantly linked to the concept of independent study – Students B, D, E, F, G and 1 specifically raised this when discussing both their expectations and their experiences of their chosen course. When asked to explain what they understood by this term, participants suggested they would work on their own in the library during free periods, completing homework, research tasks and coursework. Many of them explicitly compared this level of independent work to the lack of such requirements at school: “I study at home and I’ve developed research skills, not like at school where they just gave us a sheet to fill out…I’ve done my coursework on my own rather than being told what to write like at school” (Student E); “I’m more independent in my studying, teaching myself some of the syllabus by reading it and making my own notes whereas at school you were told it, write it down, you copy it” (Student F). Three A-Level students (B, G, I) used the term “spoon feeding” to explain how they felt information was disseminated at school, and whilst this idea was implicit in all the narratives discussed in this section, the use of such a specific term indicates participants may be repeating something they have heard, as explained by Student G: “I expected more independent work, like getting info for myself – the teachers warned us in Year 11 [the year in which most students will sit their GCSEs] that they couldn’t keep spoon feeding us now”.

The discussion of this need for independent study, both as part of their expectations and the reality of their college experience, was linked to the idea of their new course being “harder” or “more difficult” than GCSEs in the A-Level narratives. This was discussed in Chapter Six as a key theme emerging from the data, and can be interpreted in a number of ways. It may be that GCSEs in their current form do not adequately prepare learners for study at level three as they fail to develop the independent study skills required for learning at higher levels, an issue that
falls outside the scope of the LITP. More pertinent is the suggestion carried in the narratives that, for many, A-Levels remain the gold standard (Snapper, 2007) of level three qualifications and are thus seen as a more desirable form of capital, a reputation maintained by the insistence on their difficulty by learners following the course and the teachers who recommended this pathway. The fact that the expectation of independent study was identified more frequently by A-Level than vocational participants may be further evidence of a shift in the field of 16-19 education, as A-Level students feel the need to defend their position in the hierarchy by maintaining the elite, academic nature of their course.

“Confidence”

This term was used by four A-Level and six vocational participants. The most common interpretation was that the transition to college had given participants greater confidence in talking to new people, emphasising the importance of social as well as academic transition – nine of the ten used the term in this sense. Six of these were vocational students, who made clear links between this attribute and the workplace/future career paths. Student 4 spoke of how he now had more confidence in “speaking in front of large groups and the college board and governors” as part of his role in the SAG, whilst Student 12 was more explicit in linking her greater confidence in “talking to new people and working with new children” to her BTEC course, showing awareness that this would be a useful skill in the workplace. Student 2 had “developed more confidence being forced to meet new people…my social skills have developed” and identified that these would be useful both at university and at work.

Only three of the A-Level participants spoke of this type of confidence, all in the same way: “I feel more confident as a person and better at talking to new people…I was shy before but now I’m in small classes and around new people I talk more” (Student B); “it’s easier to get along with people because they love the same subject” (Student H); “I feel more confident as I’ve
had to get used to new people” (Student L). This suggests that for A-Level students, the change of environment has fostered confidence rather than the course itself, albeit facilitated through the smaller, more focused classes; in fact, only one participant (Student H) spoke of feeling more confident in her academic abilities as a result of her chosen course. This seems at odds with the stated purpose of A-Levels – “the new A levels will be linear qualifications that make sure that students develop the skills and knowledge needed for progression to undergraduate study” (Department for Education, 2014; p.4) – and suggests the social process of transitioning from school to college plays an important role in preparing learners for further study, regardless of the course they choose.

*Higher “Maturity” Levels*

When discussing how they thought their identities had changed during the transition to college, growing up and maturing was key for many of the participants. Six A-Level students used the terms “matured” or “more mature”, with two more alluding to the same concept in different words: “[college] forces you to grow up” (Student K); “I feel older and wiser than the school kids on the bus…I know more than them as I’ve had more experience and am on to the next stage of life” (Student L). This distinction between school and college was also highlighted by Student K, who felt that “[at college] you’re given more responsibilities, which forces you to grow up…they expect you to be a grown up as soon as you get here, whereas you feel like a child as a high school student”, although Student J felt that her greater maturity was a result of “age and experience” rather than college. It was noticeable that whilst the concept of maturity was often linked to academic progression for A-Level participants (“I’ve matured as a person as I’ve adopted a more organised approach to private study” - Student A), this went hand in hand with personal and social development. Student F felt “good about himself” as he had become more sociable and undergone “personal progression as well as academic”; Student G felt that she had “changed and developed as a person” as well as “learning a great deal”; and Student D stated she had become “more mature and organised – travelling
independently, managing money and deadlines…I can’t rely on others, it’s just me now”. It seems that, with the exception of Student J, physical transition to college marked a new, more mature phase of life for these learners, even though they had only been in that new environment for a few months, and a distinction had already formed between themselves and “the school kids on the bus”.

Only two BTEC students specifically used a variant of the word “mature”, with many of the others using different phrasing to explain how they felt they had changed in this regard. Student 6 had “grown…I still mess about a bit as I’m very active and sociable, but I’ve matured a lot both socially and academically”, whilst Student 11 commented “I like to think I’ve grown up a bit since high school”. Where the vocational participants diverged most clearly from the A-Level students in their discussion of maturity was in the emphasis placed on different, more positive relationships with their teachers than at school – five students alluded to this, with two saying that their teachers treated them more like an adult and implying that by being treated in such a way they were being prepared for life after college: “they phone you about absences rather than your parents – it makes you feel like you’ve got more responsibilities” (Student 12). Student 2 had found “the teaching more individualised and personalised – the teachers are more on our level and find the best way to teach us”, whilst Student 3 was “loving every minute of college – it’s more relaxed as the tutors have a laugh, but if you go off track they put you back on course”. Student 9 echoed this positive relationship, saying that “college is a lot different from school, as you get to know your teachers – they’re not just a teacher at the front of the class, which is good”. These indirect espousals of maturity through the contrast in relationships with teachers in school and teachers in college were lacking from the A-Level narratives, suggesting that these relationships are key for successful vocational students but less so for other learners. This idea is considered further in the Bourdeusian discussion that closes this chapter.
“Practical”

This term was used exclusively by vocational students, when talking about their reasons for choosing their course or their expectations of the programme (although Student K used the term to reference BTECs in a negative way: “it sounds really bad but I see BTECs as more a practical thing…A-Levels will get me further”). In the vocational narratives, the term was used in a positive sense: three used the word directly, and a further five indirectly referred to the practical nature of their chosen pathway, whilst no A-Level participants used the term apart from the instance above. The term seems to have two different applications for the vocational interviewees – “practical” in terms of continuous assessment through assignments rather than summative external examinations, and “practical” in terms of providing skills perceived to be useful in the future workplace. For some, these two aspects were inextricably linked; Students 1 and 2, for example, had chosen a BTEC in Sport and Fitness for similar reasons. Both wanted to work in the sports industry, with Student 1 commenting the “specific”, practical “training” provided by the BTEC was a more suitable route than the more “theoretical and academic” A-Level option, whilst Student 2 stated the combination of practical work alongside research activities would allow him to become either a basketball player or teacher depending on how his career worked out.

Such comments were typical in the vocational narratives, which simultaneously displayed an awareness that the non-examined, practical nature of the qualification meant BTECs were viewed as “not as good” (Student 1) or a “cop-out” (Student 9) whilst also defending the value of the capital conferred by such a pathway. Five participants stated one of their motivations for choosing a BTEC was that they weren’t good at doing tests, thereby replicating social inequalities through their own positioning of themselves in relation to A-Level students within their narratives, but there was also a clear recognition how such a practical qualification might benefit them; Student 6, for example, talked of how a BTEC had “helped” an older friend into a prestigious job in IT, and specifically mentioned the drawbacks of A-Levels where (in his
view) “they teach you to pass an exam”. This sense of preparation for the workplace is discussed further in the next section.

“Preparation”

This term was used across both cohorts, with three A-Level and five BTEC students using the words “preparation” or “preparing”. Student A spoke of adapting his lifestyle in preparation for his “next stage of life”, whereas Students J and L both talked of college as part of a journey: “things are going smoothly…it’s like I’m on a track from school, to college, to uni, preparing me constantly for everything” (Student J). This comment, and the stated intention of all the A-Level students to progress to HE, indicates that for these participants the A-Level is seen as a specific form of preparation and entitlement for university. Student B had chosen A-Levels as the “best route to university” despite being unsure of her future career path, suggesting she believed this qualification (and her subsequent degree) would provide the generic skills required for any future job she entered. However, whilst the A-Level narratives do reinforce the ideas around learner journeys discussed in Chapter Four, the picture is perhaps more complicated, as will be discussed below in terms of how well the members of the staff focus group thought A-Levels actually prepared students for further study.

There was greater variety in the vocational narratives concerning what exactly college was preparing them for. As already discussed above through use of terms like “confidence” and “practical”, more BTEC students showed an awareness of the future workplace in their narratives, some in quite explicit terms: “[a BTEC in ICT] opens the door wider for going into an organisation with more skills” (Student 3). Once again, it is noticeable that vocational qualifications preparing students for the workplace are narrated within these stories as a positive rather than a negative or limiting factor, delivering the skills and knowledge required to acquire a desirable job but also allowing the possibility of going on to further study – Student
2, for example, felt he had developed “good skills” that would be useful both “at uni and at work”. Whilst it appears true to at least some extent that A-Levels prepare students for further academic study whilst vocational qualifications prepare students for the workplace, the picture presented in these narratives is not as clear-cut as traditionally supposed.

Use of Composite Profiles and Staff Focus Group

The thematic and linguistic analyses of the data suggest whilst some similarities exist across both cohorts, such as an increased sense of social confidence and maturity, other elements appear more clearly linked to particular academic pathways. In order to explore this further, eight composite learner profiles were developed from the data as detailed in Chapter Five and in Appendices 10, 11 and 12. These were then given to five members of the teaching staff at NCFE and subsequently discussed in an hour-long focus group, the findings of which are presented below.

Findings and Discussion

The participants in the focus group agreed they had encountered all eight of the learner types across both BTEC and A-Level students – “I recognise everyone…it’s just the proportion that varies, that’s all” (T1); “I’ve definitely seen them all…I can see my students evenly across them all” (T2). Some participants, particularly those with experience of teaching both vocational and A-Level qualifications, felt some categories of learner were more prevalent on particular pathways – “I see more Second Chances and Get Me Where I Need to Go in my BTEC students” (T3), [in response] “Yes, I’ve never seen a Second Chance where a voc student has gone to A-Level…A-Level students are more Love of Learning whilst BTEC are more the Practical One and Subject Specialists” (T1). This supports ideas expressed in the learner narratives, where eight vocational participants alluded to the practical nature of their course and three (all ICT students) spoke of the
benefits conferred by the ability to specialise in one subject: “I did well in ICT at GCSE and wanted more detail – it was the best for me, and a good pathway” (Student 4).

However, participants agreed the differences were rarely clear cut, and that no type was definitively identified with one particular cohort other than the Second Chance: “lots of the vocational students are those on their second chance” (T2); “In my second year BTEC group over half originally did A-Levels so there are lots of second chancers, and the number is rising every year” (T3). This seems more the result of extrinsic factors rather than anything intrinsic to the learners themselves, with T3 going on to suggest “they’re not making informed decisions when coming into college. They get too comfortable during their GCSEs and found it too easy, so they just don’t engage at A-Level and find it too difficult”. However, T3 stated that 100% of her Second Chance students in the previous year had gone on to be successful in achieving their BTEC, indicating these learners had found an academic pathway to which they were more suited, an idea discussed later in this chapter.

It was agreed by all members of the focus group that each qualification furnished learners with different skills, with the A-Level route considered to provide more suitable skills for university study. T3 drew on her experience of teaching on both pathways: “the type of writing that the BTEC students do is very different – it’s very descriptive, using illustrative examples whilst A-Levels are more about analysis and discussion”. T4 put a more positive spin on this: “for A-Level students, college is the next step in being educated and they haven’t really thought about a job. BTEC students are more focussed on what they’ll be doing in ten years’ time rather than September”. Whilst the learner narratives offered some contradictions to this notion, with some A-Level students mentioning future career plans such as teaching and many vocational learners expressing an immediate desire to go to university, all A-Level participants identified a desire to progress to HE as a motivation for choosing their course. T2 commented
most of her vocational students wanted to go on to teaching, and that whilst “some don’t want to go on to uni, they feel they have something they can use for work”, with T3 agreeing that “they [the BTEC students] like the practical element – the link to work is made clearer”.

The discussion of progression to university within the focus group suggests that despite the variety of learners across NCFE and the success of BTEC students in achieving places in HE, staff still regard the more traditional A-Level route as the most appropriate pathway. This has interesting resonance with Nolan’s (2012) study into the attitudes of trainee mathematics teachers who defended the use of traditional pedagogies in the classroom, leading Nolan to suggest “their defensive positioning is a form of orthodoxy – they are aware of other pedagogical discourses but they defend rules, procedures, and note-taking as the ‘right’ or best way to prepare students for university” (p.208). It could thus be argued that school and college teachers, who play an influential role in imbuing learners with the necessary attributes to succeed in an academic environment, are continuing to promote the doxa that A-Levels are the more desirable form of academic capital to hold. However, not all the focus group participants felt A-Levels were adequate preparation for university, with T1 saying “A-Levels don’t give you the skills of independent exploration” and T2 agreeing “it’s more down to the nature of the students”, raising interesting questions about disposition that are discussed further below. It is beyond the scope of the LITP to question the adequacy of individual qualifications in preparing learners for academic transition, but there was a clear feeling that learners on both pathways lacked the qualities perceived by these teachers as needed for future success: “all my students struggle with time management” (T1); “they are much less independent – they are not really preparing for leaving home” (T4); “do you come across students who miss school? I see lots of these – they miss the way everything is organised for them” (T5).
Participants in the focus group felt greater social cohesion existed amongst the vocational cohorts, not only between the learners but with their teachers: “voc is like family; A-Level isn’t” (T5). This was largely felt to be a product of organisational structures, with T2 identifying this as “to do with how the timetable is structured – you see them all the time” and reflecting the fact that BTEC learners remain with the same peers for all lessons whilst A-Level students “go from class to class – my own daughter [currently studying A-Levels at another college] struggles to connect” (T2). The focus group comments on social groupings support the strong sense of camaraderie amongst their peers and the positive relationships with teaching staff identified in the vocational learner narratives:

- T1: I’m always surprised by how diverse A-Level students are. The voc all have their mates.
- T4: Yes, they become very strong friends.
- T1: The A-Level kids are more isolated. I assume they know each other but they don’t. It’s often Christmas before they trust each other, or us.

Whether this social cohesion is entirely a result of college structures or is due in some part to differing dispositions on each pathway is considered further in the Bourdieusian analysis that closes the chapter.

Finally, the focus group agreed no extra categories of learner were needed, and that the eight composite profiles provided a fair representation of the types of students both at NCFE and at other educational institutions in which they had worked. However, two sub-categories were suggested - success stories, and students who miss school. It was felt that rather than form a distinct category of their own, each of these can appear across all eight of the existing composites. The discussion also recognised the messy nature of reality, and that rather than fit neatly into one group, some students bridge more than one category, although no particular examples were given: “I don’t think there are any more groups [than the eight
profiles provided] but many students are a bit of several” (T3). Whilst the analysis of the learner narratives and the focus group discussion has identified some of these complexities, they cannot be fully explored through any approach that reduces data to themes and patterns. The final section of this chapter therefore adopts some of Bourdieu’s thinking tools to offer a consideration of the data and its implications for both policy and practice.

Disposition and Habitus

Bourdieu’s notion of disposition (1977) is of particular interest to the LITP, suggesting habitus has a strong bearing upon an individual’s decision to follow a particular educational pathway, and perhaps reflecting that within a vocational student’s disposition lies a socially constructed belief that they are suited to a less academic course. This is reflected within the student narratives, where learners with a scholarly habitus or disposition had been recommended the A-Level route whilst those predicted weaker GCSE grades were encouraged away from this path. This can be seen as a negative influencing factor, limiting individuals by a process of socialised tendencies and thus creating what Colley et al (2007) call “vocational habitus”, reproducing social inequalities by teaching learners to practice in a particular way, develop certain personal qualities, and accept their place in a hierarchical workplace. However, the narratives collected during the LITP with learners studying in an applied general rather than an occupational context suggested that a different form of habitus is developing for these students, with participants viewing the career-oriented nature of their studies as an advantage rather than a restriction, and with the bulk of the respondents considering going on to HE. Some members of the focus group were similarly positive about the vocational nature of such courses, with T3 talking of the clear link to the workplace and suggesting the “A-Level [as a qualification] should work on this. Some students get to the end of A-Level and don’t know what they’ve learned”. T4 identified that around three quarters of her BTEC group knew what they wanted to do in the future, and whilst the cohort therefore included a high number of “Get Me Where I Need To Go” students, she felt this was a positive: “many are capable of A-Level
but choose the voc route due to the work placement that gives them an edge in fields like nursing”. She had previously worked in a sixth form college where many A-Level students had chosen their course because “that’s what you did…they picked subjects they liked with no thought of career. They focus on a pathway – they’re on a path and they’re following it”. Thus the data indicates that the notion of vocational habitus may be changing, and no longer limits learners to a restricted future but instead offers a clear pathway to success in both education and the workplace.

Additionally, comments from the focus group suggested that success in progressing to the next stage of life – whether this be work or university – was more down to “the nature of the students” (T2) than choice of course. This is an important idea in the context of this study, as a clear feeling emerged from the focus group that, whilst social cohesion amongst students was largely a product of external structures such as timetabling, differences do exist in the behaviours and learning styles of each cohort:

T3: BTEC students are always shouting over each other, whilst A-Level are more quiet. BTEC are more vocal – their style is to get involved.

T5: There’s definitely different styles of learning – BTEC students are less reflective than A-Level.

T1: BTEC are reflective, but in a different way – they reflect during rather than afterwards and it’s not always verbal or written, but inferred in the work.

T2: Yes, they are reflecting, just not after the event in the more traditional academic way.

This exchange raises interesting questions about the nature of disposition and habitus, and whether BTEC students behave in this way because they are predisposed to do so and are revealing their existing habitus through practice, or because structures such as differing delivery methods on different courses create particular forms of behaviour and thereby reproduce social inequalities. The comments reproduced above indicate that whilst such behaviours may be encouraged by particular course structures, certain dispositions are more
prevailent on different pathways, particularly as T3’s opening comment refers to a group where, unusually, BTEC and A-Level learners are combined for certain modules which have an overlap in content. A similar question can be posed by the very positive student-teacher relationships identified by five of the vocational participants, and whether these are a product of a particular habitus that disposes learners who have chosen this pathway to develop positive attitudes towards tutors in their everyday practices, or a result of practical considerations such as the pedagogical and timetabling differences. Whilst a study of this scale is not able to fully address such questions, suggestions for further research are made in Chapter Eight when evaluating how the MERITS Plus Model could be used in future studies to consider some of these complexities further.

**Fields, Games and Capital**

Bourdieu (1977) points out that “academic qualifications are a weak currency and possess all their value only within the limits of the academic market” (p.507) – a market that includes universities, whose examiners and admissions tutors have historically favoured the values of the dominant classes (Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, 1974). However, it can be argued that the increasing recognition of vocational qualifications has created tensions within the field of 16-19 education. Additionally, NCFE is just one of many FE colleges offering both A-Levels and vocational qualifications to learners from the same, largely working-class backgrounds, raising issues about Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, particularly in terms of the claim that learners from “culturally unflavoured classes” eliminate themselves from education “based upon the unconscious estimation of the objective probabilities of success possessed by the whole category” (Bourdieu, 1977; p.495). Whilst some focus group participants highlighted the analytical and discursive skills developed by A-Levels as advantageous as preparation for HE, the number of BTEC participants stating university entry as motivation for course choice indicates vocational learners are no longer eliminating themselves from future academic and professional success.
This raises questions about the types of games currently being played in the field of 16-19 education, and the relative value assigned to each. As noted in the previous chapter, three participants had recognised they were playing the wrong game altogether and didn’t have the capital to participate in the A-Level game, despite having initially chosen this pathway. This was echoed by T3 saying she had a successful BTEC group where over half had originally enrolled on A-Levels, and that the number of “second chance” students was rising every year. Whilst factors beyond the scope of this study, such as the quality of progression advice given in schools, may be at play here, T1 suggested the structure of the BTEC offered its own forms of advantageous capital rarely highlighted in the literature: “having 18 hours a week for one subject gives them time to fail and respond – they don’t fear failure as it’s part of the process. You have to step off the edge sometimes. Voc are often better at that because they have more time to turn it around”. This kind of emotional resilience and willingness to take risks is a valuable form of capital suggesting an increasing recognition that A-Levels are not the only way to achieve success, particularly as many of the BTEC participants had – by their own identification – not excelled in the exam-based school system, but were now doing well in the college environment. The recognition by the vocational learners of the development of skills useful in both future work and study suggests an immersion in this new field, and supports other research which suggests that habitus is seen most clearly when an individual is in such a situation (Davey, 2009). The adaptive nature of habitus means a new field can present the opportunity to both alter one’s own habitus and affect existing social and educational structures, and whilst the subject of vocational students doing well academically remains under-researched, the data collected for this study indicate that such a process may be at work in NCFE.

**Agency, Structure and Misrecognition**

The range of learner types illustrated by the composite profiles raises questions about the choices available to young people entering 16-19 education, both in terms of opportunities
and who is controlling and making those choices. As summarised in Chapter Two, the options currently available for Level 3 study are limited, with the vast majority of institutions offering, at most, three potential pathways: A-Levels, BTECs and apprenticeships. Thus learners who believe they are exercising agency in controlling their own futures are actually operating within a very narrow range of structures, particularly as the data suggests teachers, family and friends play a significant part in recommending particular routes based on what they perceive to be most appropriate. The relatively small numbers of level three learners in the UK following the vocational route (European Commission, 2011) despite its acceptability as a pathway to both HE and the workplace indicate that the dominant cultural structures still favour the more traditionally academic route offered by A-Levels, as further evidenced by Morgan’s (2016) calls for greater parity of advice in schools concerning level three options. T3’s comment during the focus group that A-Level students are “not making informed decisions when coming into college” because they find GCSEs too easy and thus inadequate preparation for the rigours of level three study contributes to a picture of an education system failing to support learners in fully exerting either individuality or intentionality when making academic choices.

This system of recommending particular learners take A-Levels based on likely GCSE performance may also contribute to the misrecognition apparent in some of the narratives. The participants from both cohorts appeared willing to accept the orthodoxy that asserts success in examination-based courses equals academic superiority through the cultural capital that such success bestows, despite the fact many A-Level participants stated they were finding the course demanding and some did indeed go on to perform at a lower level than they had hoped. Meanwhile, the narratives of the vocational learners, speaking positively about their courses and what their studies could lead to, indicate a growing heterodoxy is at work within the field of 16-19 education, challenging the existing status quo even if the learners are not consciously aware they are doing so. By the very fact of doing
well, these learners are positing a new set of beliefs placing a higher value on vocational education, and creating new discourses presenting a more positive identity for the BTEC pathway. These discourses frequently developed during the course of individual narratives, with many vocational participants starting on a deficit note such as a perceived inability to excel in examinations (Students 3, 4, 7, 10, 11) or the relative merits of vocational education (seen as “not as good” as A-Levels according to Student 1 and echoed by Student 9), but then going on to speak of how the course was the best option for them in terms of their future goals (which included careers in journalism, teaching, IT-related jobs, nursing and childcare). Thus, by challenging the notion that a vocational habitus is lesser than its academic equivalent, the agency of these learners has the opportunity to shape the educational structures in which they are operating – although the misrecognition apparent in the narratives indicates this process still has some way to go.

Chapters Six and Seven have discussed the key findings from analysing the data collected in the student interviews and the staff focus group, as well as introducing the composite learner profiles created from the student narratives and discussed in the focus group. This has been done using both a thematic and linguistic approach, with an examination of the anomalies and issues raised in the data using Bourdieu’s thinking tools. I now go on to present an evaluation of the MERITS Plus model used to perform this multi-layered analysis by considering what the framework has brought to the study and how it could be developed and used in future research.
Chapter Eight: The Development of the MERITS Plus Model and its Contribution to Knowledge

Introduction

This chapter presents an important outcome of the LITP: the development of the MERITS Plus model, a conceptual framework central to my contribution to knowledge. I examine the gains made in the study by the design and use of this model, both as a method of research design and as an analytical framework. In so doing, this chapter builds upon Chapter Two, which outlined the development of the original MERITS model through pilot fieldwork. However, this chapter specifically explains how the LITP has developed the MERITS Plus model, realising the full potential of the “Stories and Synthesis” element through conceptual and empirical work, and adding a layer of further analysis through the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools in order to challenge the neatness of the original model and contextualise findings. Using Bourdieu’s thinking tools in this way is a new and distinctive development to the model which allows for a multi-layered approach to the data and contributes to knowledge and understanding of the interplay between these learner motivations, expectations, perceptions of reality, identity and academic transition within particular contexts. This chapter also considers the implications that the use of this model holds for students, before these ideas are developed further in Chapter Nine.

I first discuss what the use of the MERITS Plus model has revealed about the learner narratives by focusing on one participant and exploring what each of the first five stages of the original MERIT model demonstrates about this learner’s experiences of academic transition. I then go on to discuss how the use of Bourdeusian analysis allows understanding of the complexity of the narrative and how it links with other “stories” collected as part of the data, as well as the interplay between the agency of individual learners as espoused in their narratives and the educational structures within which they operate. By doing so, I
demonstrate the important gains made by the development of the original model into the MERITS Plus model. The second half of the chapter looks at how the MERITS Plus model could be developed and used in the future, by considering further research that could add to the understanding that the model offers and continuing its development. By doing so, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the model's contribution to knowledge as a practical and transferrable conceptualisation of the impact of academic transition on learner identity.

What has the MERITS Plus model revealed about the data?

The MERITS model in its original form was used in two key ways: as a method of designing the interview schedules used in the LITP, and as a framework for analysing the resulting data. The LITP adopts an interpretivist case study approach, with student interviews as the primary method of data collection. If the case study is seen as a "soft option" (Robson, 2002: p.179) in some quarters due to its subjective nature, rigour is needed in the design of the research tools to make it transparently clear how the researcher has obtained and interpreted the data being used to address the research questions and aims, as well as clarity in the explanation of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study (Tong et al, 2007). This is important in providing reflexivity where the case study involves ethnographic aspects due to the identity of the researcher as a member of staff embedded in the setting. The use of a conceptual framework developed from existing literatures and piloted through empirical work helps to provide this clarity and transparency. The gains made are illustrated through use of data from one learner narrative, and by working through what each element has added to understanding the process of academic transition for this individual, I provide a tangible example of the MERITS Plus model's contribution to knowledge. The learner selected is Student F, chosen because he spoke for the longest time and with the least prompting, and thus the model was particularly useful in making sense of the narrative provided. An extract from his narrative can be found in Appendix 9.
Motivations

Student F had evidently thought about his decision to study A-Levels for some time, commenting he had originally looked at a BTEC in Drama in year 7 (the first year of secondary school). However, an increasing interest in the subject of Psychology led to a change of plan, and he “knew for certain” by year 10 that he wanted to study A-Levels. He believed that a career in Psychology was “more accessible” via this route, both in terms of actually getting into university and in developing the analytical skills required for the course and for the job itself. The fact that an individual might consider their post-16 choices for the whole five years of secondary school is interesting in itself, but this thoughtful approach, based on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators and apparently without explicit advice from others, also manifested in the articulation of a number of expectations of what it might mean to be a college A-Level student, as espoused below.

Expectations

Student F spoke about both his expectations of pedagogical changes and of the social elements of transition. His comments about academic standards mirrored many of the other participants’, saying that expected to be “more independent” and that there would be “a lot of work” in terms of essays, coursework and exams – he had already taught himself some of the syllabus for each subject by reading and making his own notes, whereas at school learning had been more formulaic: you were “told it, you write it down, you copy it”. Student F had actively chosen to go to a different college from people he knew at school, as he was hoping to make new friends and lose the “cliques” popular at school and stated he had formed the idea from American teenage films and television shows that college would be a fresh start. He spoke humorously about this last point, indicating he felt a little foolish now to have drawn his expectations – which, according to Gorard et al (2012), are grounded in social reality – from fictional sources, but his comments suggest that young people draw
upon a wide range of past experiences when making academic choices. As noted below, these expectations regarding social transition were fulfilled.

*Reality*

This student said college had “lived up to expectations”, but chose to talk only of the social side of his new learning environment. He had met a “diverse range of people with different backgrounds and experiences”, and had made many new friends, which had given him a “sense of progression” in leaving behind his childhood self. An important element of this was the number of extra-curricular activities he had become involved with; he was, for example, an active member of the SAG, and organised frequent charity events within the college. He had enjoyed these activities for their own sake, but also for introducing him to a wide range of new friends – Student F had friends right across the college rather than confined to any one study area. He also said his own personal skills had progressed as a result of these activities, saying he was surprised by how much he had been encouraged to develop his own views. Whilst this student’s expectations were based on ideas he had formed from fictional television programmes, it seemed he had successfully exerted agency in creating a reality to match what he hoped his college experience would be – by deliberately choosing a different college from his school friends and by joining societies and organisations in order to make new friends, he had taken control over the transition process as far as possible within the structures available to him. This supports the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1968), whereby learners create the reality they are expecting (Konings et al, 2008) – for Student F, positive expectations led to what he perceived as a successful and positive reality.

*Identity*

Student F became emotional when reflecting on how he thought the process of moving to college had affected his identity. He said he felt more mature and independent, linking this to
the social aspects of transition – he had grown in confidence and felt “good” about himself, become more sociable, and undergone “personal progression as well as academic”. He had considerably more friends now and interacted with others far more than when at school, saying that he saw this as “all part of growing up”. For this student, identity appeared both fluid and dialogic, changing both with time and maturity, and in relation to the new structures provided by the change of learning environment. Interestingly, he appeared not to align himself with any one specific social group, and instead talked about a variety of friendship groups, suggesting that by participating in a range of extra-curricular activities a college student can circumvent the binary created between different qualifications by structural mechanisms such as timetabling.

Transition

Student F was entirely positive about the process of academic and social transition. His narrative suggested he had taken charge of the process for himself – he did not mention his parents during the interview, nor any input from his teachers in terms of what academic pathway he might follow. Instead, he had done his own research on the internet and by speaking to universities, and had arranged to attend information evenings and taster sessions put on by NCFE and other colleges. Whilst it is possible parents and teachers had more of a role than stated during the interview, Student F nevertheless provides an example of an individual taking advantage of college structures and activities in order to smooth the process of transition for himself. This student was something of an anomaly within the data in terms of the levels of personal agency and autonomy he was able to exercise, although it should be noted that these choices were, in practice, restricted by the options available to him for level three study.
Stories and Synthesis

This element of the framework is used in two ways: firstly, to bring together the first five elements of the model into one learner story, and then to bring these individual stories into broader learner “types”. Here I discuss the first of these, before going on to discuss the second in the section on composite learner profiles that follows. The worked example of Student F illustrates how the first five elements of the model link together to produce the story of this student’s experience of academic transition. Each part of the framework leads on to the next; here, Student F’s motivations for choosing his course – believing that A-Levels would be the most appropriate qualification for developing the skills required for studying at university – appear to have strongly influenced his expectations of the academic requirements of the course, and these in turn influenced his perception of the reality. Student F’s discussion of his lack of confidence at school when talking about changes in his identity also suggests that the absence of friendship groups had influenced his desire for a new start socially on his move to college, and to rid himself of the school “cliques” from which he had been excluded. This also helps explain the exclusive focus on the social aspects of transition when discussing what he perceived as the reality of the college environment. Student F had thrown himself into many of the extra-curricular activities available within the college and by doing so had gained the new friends he had sought, thus providing an interesting example of how structures can actually enable agency. NCFE has a number of strategies, such as the SAG, in place for helping students integrate and form friendships with their peers, and Student F had taken full advantage of these in developing the identity of a confident, outgoing individual with a range of friends across the college.
The MERITS Plus model as a multi-layered approach

*Use in Conjunction with Composite Learner Profiles*

The MERITS Plus model was always conceived as being used in conjunction with composite learner profiles, based directly on the data as an additional method of presenting the learner voices captured in the narratives. The creation of these learner “types” helps realise the potential identified during the pilot fieldwork of the “Stories and Synthesis” element as a means of bringing together individual experiences into broader stories both illustrating the range of learners within one setting and highlighting wider issues in education. The inspiration for such an approach came from the separate work of Thomson (2002) and Clough (2002), as by creating fictional profiles that characterise and represent particular individuals whilst also aligning them with others with whom they share similarities, the researcher can begin to understand how a learner possesses an individual identity as well as sharing elements of collective identity due to similarity of experience, disposition or background. For Thomson (2002), her two “hypothetical children…are not simply fiction: these stories are grounded in my research and they carry the theorisation of the production of educational disadvantage” (p.xiii). The notion of how “life trajectories are connected – and differentiated – through the school system” (Thomson, 2002; p.2) has led me to produce composite profiles carrying the theorisation of the credentialing of different qualifications and pathways, with each element of the MERITS Plus model contributing to their creation. A full breakdown of the process of creating the composite profiles is provided in Appendix 11.

*Challenging the model and the use of Bourdieu*

The most significant development to the model during the LITP was the addition of a layer of Bourdeusian analysis. Whilst the original MERITS model revealed thematic and linguistic trends within the data, any approach using an analytical framework is a reductive process
and can risk concealing more than it reveals. The development of the MERITS Plus model has helped overcome this potential limitation, and made a distinctive advance from the initial framework. The use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools in combination with the original MERITS model to form the MERITS Plus approach represents an important shift in the development of this framework and the contribution it makes to the understanding of academic transition and its impact upon learner identity.

For the purposes of the LITP, Bourdieu’s tools were selected and grouped as follows. Firstly, disposition and habitus, to consider whether different identities exist among learners on particular pathways. Secondly, fields, games and capital were used to focus on the field of 16-19 education and the games being played there over qualifications with differing values. Finally, agency, structure and misrecognition were considered in examining how much choice individuals are actually able to exert in selecting academic pathways and how far they recognise the values conferred by different qualifications. These tools gave an additional layer to my analysis, vital when dealing with the messy nature of reality: the initial thematic analysis raised questions about the data which necessitated a different approach in addressing their complexities. Notably, the compilation of eight different composite learner profiles drawn from 24 individual narratives in just one educational setting required further consideration to explain how such diversity can be produced by a mass education system. All the participants in the LITP came from local secondary schools and had undertaken the same educational route by studying GCSEs at level two, and whilst the focus group undertaken at NCFE allowed further discussion of the diversity evident across the learners, this alone was insufficient to explain the findings without the use of Bourdieusian analysis.

This reflects the findings of other researchers such as Williams et al (2009), whose research into the identities revealed during biographical narratives provided by mathematics students concluded “discursive and narrative analyses are inadequate to understanding the formation
of identity in practice: we need a unit of analysis that bounds the engagement of the self in social practice and in narrative work” (p.39). The key phrase here is “in practice”, emphasising the fluid and dialogic nature of identity, which alters both over time and in relation to different contexts and structures rather than being a fixed reference point. In this regard, the use of thematically-analysed learner narratives has been both helpful and restrictive, with each interview capturing an individual at a particular moment in time and reflecting the dynamic nature of a developing identity, whilst also providing a snapshot rather than a longitudinal picture, as demonstrated in the discussion of Student F’s narrative. As the LITP is interested in group identities rather than individual trajectories of participants, this lack of longitudinal focus is not an issue – in addressing my research aims I have chosen to look at a large sample over a short period of time rather than follow a small number of individuals over a longer time period. However, the MERITS-driven analysis of the narratives can identify the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ but not fully explain the ‘why’, as a horizontal discussion of patterns alone fails to locate individuals within the social structures and practices that have influenced – and continue to influence - the construction of their own espoused identities. This sense of an individual adopting a particular position has already been highlighted in the discussion of use of narratives in Chapter Five - “we are never the sole authors of our own narratives; in every conversation a positioning takes place” (Czarniawska 2004, p.5) – and thus the MERITS Plus model incorporating a Bourdeusian perspective has allowed me not only to analyse the narratives as individual stories, but to understand them as products of particular social contexts.

Additionally, any theoretical or methodological framework risks the accusation of being too neat to reflect the messy and unpredictable nature of reality, and of overlooking anomalies and contradictions in its desire for order and pattern. This is a particular risk for a researcher negotiating a dual role as practitioner, who may have pre-existing ideas and concepts and fail to place sufficient emphasis on the data in its own right as a result. Identity is a complex subject
which in its fluidity is resistant to hard boundaries, and the right balance must be struck between interpretation and letting the narratives speak for themselves. Any thematic approach used alone runs the risk of not allowing participant voices to come through – a risk the LITP has countered through its use of a range of methods to present the data from different angles. Firstly, the use of extended quotation from the data grouped under different elements of the framework allows individual voices to emerge whilst identifying common patterns. Secondly, composite profiles were created directly from the learner narratives, before discussion by experienced teaching staff at NCFE. Finally, the use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools allowed me to consider the contradictions within the data and locate them within specific social practices as discussed above. This multi-layered methodological approach places due emphasis on the individual voices collected in the study whilst also attempting to explain their reasons for adopting and espousing particular identities in their narratives by looking at their positioning within particular cultural fields.

In short, the limitations of the MERITS model in its original form largely related to its inability to provide the broader contextualisation required to fully address my research questions. Whilst the framework allowed me to identify significant trends within my data, to understand the implications of these and relate them to the current diversity in provision has necessitated further stages of thought and analysis. The development of the MERITS Plus model has not only allowed me to capture the unfolding situation but also to relate this picture to the bigger education debate, making it an invaluable tool for understanding the impact that crucial moments in an individual’s academic experiences – such as transition – can have on identity. With this in mind I now go on to discuss how the model could develop in the future as well as how it may be used in further research in educational or other settings, before concluding with a discussion of the contribution the model makes to knowledge, both theory and practice.
Future development and use of the MERITS Plus model

Future developments to the model as a result of the current study

The model has already undergone a number of changes since its inception to reach its current form. As the model was originally designed to conceptualise identity and examine the impact of academic transition, it is crucial that the framework and its ability to develop and change reflects the fluid and dialogic nature of identity itself. Therefore, whilst the addition of the Bourdeusian analysis has resulted in a multi-layered approach to understanding the relationship between academic transition and learner identity, the collection and analysis of further data at NCFE or other settings could result in additional nuances that need working through if the model is to retain its ability to provide insights into learner experiences of transition. With this in mind, I now consider two potential uses of the model in different settings.

Potential transferability of the model

Although developed in an FE college, the MERITS Plus model is presented as a transferrable framework that could be used in any educational setting to understand academic transition and the impact it may have on the identities of those undertaking the process. The inclusion of the fifth element of the model – transition – places emphasis on this transferability, and whilst I have looked at the transition from level two study at school to level three study in college, the model could be used to address any other stage in a learner’s progression through the education system. Further research of this kind would also help continue the development of the model beyond the limitations inevitably caused by the small-scale nature of the LITP. Further research needs to be done on the first three elements – motivations, expectations and reality – to ensure parity across the different elements and a fully transferrable framework. For example, the study revealed that some learners espoused intrinsic motivations for selecting their course, some extrinsic, and some
a combination of the two, but lacked the scope to investigate the impact (if any) this variation had upon expectations and perceived realities of the course.

Additionally, the LITP is limited to just one stage of academic transition, and as such can only briefly refer to the stage that has gone before and the one that will (potentially) follow. Transition as experienced by learners moving into HE has been more widely researched than the move to level three discussed in this study, with work over the last two decades placing emphasis on both the social and academic aspects of this process (see, for example, Kantanis (2000); Terenzini et al (1994); Demetriou et al (2000)). Much of this research highlights the need for support during the transition process if learners are to successfully adapt to this new stage of education, both in the form of creating new friendship groups and of receiving appropriate academic support from tutors in order to manage the pedagogical changes associated with level four study. The interest in researching this particular stage of transition perhaps reflects both its international appeal and its status as post-compulsory – learners have more freedom to leave university if they fail to manage the transition process, and as such, stakeholders have an interest in understanding why this happens and taking steps to mitigate the factors that cause students to drop out. That said, little of the existing literature specifically considers the impact of the transition process upon learner identity, and in focusing on the support mechanisms required at an institutional level perhaps fails to take into account the needs of individuals. With continued emphasis on widening participation and the growing numbers of mature students entering HE, it is important to understand the fluid nature of identity and how it may be affected by studying at a higher level than before, particularly as many mature entrants have substantial breaks from education and may need different forms of support than younger learners.
Similarly, whilst there has been more research conducted with school-age children than those aged 16-19, there is relatively little literature on the subject of transition into level two study, which for most learners in England will take place at the age of 14 as they begin the two-year study of GCSEs. Recent research priorities have included the disparity in academic performance between girls and boys, and – on a related note – the likelihood of students from different backgrounds aspiring to go to university when older. Particular focus has fallen upon white working-class boys as part of the overall drive to increase rates of participation in HE across all socio-economic groups and ethnicities, with a recent study finding “66% of 10-15 year olds stated positive aspirations for college/university, but boys are significantly less likely to aspire (58%) compared to girls…a smaller percentage (66%) of White children hold aspirations for higher levels of education compared to all other ethnic groups” (Berrington et al, 2016; p.743-744). This emphasis is understandable in an increasingly multi-cultural society. However, much has happened in education in recent years, and it can be argued that priorities have changed. The target set by the then-Labour government in 2002 of 50% of all young people attending university (DfES, 2002) has come under attack from a number of quarters, to the point that “in recent years the government has downgraded the 50% figure from a ‘target’ to an ‘aspiration’” (Turner, 2010; unpaged). With employers and other stakeholders calling for qualifications that provide specific skills for the job to which the student aspires on the one hand, and the recent suggestion of a return to a selective education system (May, 2016) on the other, tensions are created in which the learners themselves often have little say other than through the limited agency exercised in the subjects they choose at GCSE and beyond. Currently, many secondary schools allow learners to study one or more BTEC qualifications at level 2 alongside their GCSEs, allowing students who already have a particular interest in a vocational subject such as Childcare or ICT to begin pursuing this path. It remains to be seen whether this option continues, although the decision to scrap certain A-Levels including ICT, Archaeology and Art History (Ofqual, 2014) and the insistence by Russell Group universities on grade Bs in certain GCSEs such as English indicates particular subjects may be prioritised above others. Thus,
a student’s choice of subjects at level two becomes more important, as their performance in these examinations not only determines whether they go on to study at level three, but may also affect their educational options at level four and beyond. The MERITS Plus model can help understand the impact of this vital transition period on learners within the school system, and give a voice to those at the heart of the issue – a voice that is rarely heard, perhaps because these learners are still in compulsory education and thus their choices are controlled to an even greater degree than the participants in the LITP.

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how this study makes an important methodological contribution to knowledge through the development and use of the MERITS Plus model, as well as the empirical data collected and presented in the study. The model contributes to a growing tradition of conceptual frameworks used in research areas such as transition pedagogy (see, for example, Kift 2005 and Morgan 2012, 2013) which aim to provide a link between theory and practice and thereby facilitate the understanding of data collected in real-life contexts. The MERITS Plus offers more flexibility than many of these in its ability to serve both as a method of research design and analytical framework, and offers a multi-layered approach through incorporating composite learner profiles and a Bourdeusian perspective. This allows the data to be viewed and presented from different angles, and provides a contextual focus that enables the model to be transferred to any setting. The final chapter of this thesis explores this further by explaining the key findings of the study and their implications for different sectors of the academic community, including practitioners, learners and their families, researchers and policymakers.
Chapter Nine: Conclusions to the Study and Implications of Findings

Introduction

This final chapter presents a summary of the key findings and considers the outcomes of the LITP by identifying trends and tendencies revealed in the data, as well as explaining the study’s contribution to knowledge. Thus I begin by revisiting each of the LITP’s four research questions and discussing what the thematic, linguistic and Bourdeusian analyses of the learner narratives along with the findings from the staff focus group discussion of the composite learner profiles have demonstrated in relation to each one, thereby offering a synoptic overview of the study by bringing all the individual elements into one cohesive project. This section closes by summing up why the findings and outcomes outlined here are important, and how they make a contribution to the field of 16-19 education rather than just the individual college where the data was collected.

The chapter then moves on to a consideration of what the study’s key findings actually mean, and their implications for different sectors of the academic community. Firstly, I discuss the potential impact on the teaching profession, particularly in terms of the teaching and learning taking place in FE colleges and the partnerships between these institutions and the secondary schools that feed into them. Some recommendations are made that may ease the transition process from school to college, and whilst these are based on the data collected at NCFE they are general recommendations rather than being aimed specifically at this one institution, which demonstrated a number of areas of good practice in this regard according to the LITP’s participants. This consideration of the professional context concludes with an exploration of what it means to undertake a professional doctorate by discussing what I have learned from the study in my dual role as researcher and practitioner, along with the significance of undertaking this type of study as a professional educator working in a
particular field. I then discuss the possible implications for students undertaking the transition from level two to level three and their families, before considering the wider policy implications of the LITP’s findings. Finally, the chapter closes with an examination of the implications for research, and considers how the MERITS Model Plus can be taken forward and used in other contexts in order to investigate further the trends and tendencies that have been glimpsed but not fully revealed in the LITP.

**Summary of Key Findings**

*What factors do learners identify as having impacted on their academic choices in deciding to study either A-Levels or a BTEC as a level three programme of study?*

The respondents within the study expressed a range of reasons for choosing their course, often a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. One trend was a desire to go on to study at university, with participants viewing their college course as a stepping stone or bridge between secondary and higher education. All the A-Level participants suggested this as a reason for choosing their course, with eight of them stating an assumption that A-Levels were the best (if not only) way of achieving this aim. Of these, only one (Student J) expressed a personal opinion that A-Levels would be better preparation for HE because of their analytical content, with the remaining seven having been told by teachers or parents that A-Levels were the most suitable route for students likely to do well in their GCSEs.

Meanwhile, ten of the BTEC students were considering applying for university, although this was spoken of in less certain terms with, for example, Student 3 saying he might go to university but wanted to work for a year first. All the BTEC students talked about the job they wanted to progress into after college or university – a job which was, in all cases, linked directly to their vocational subject. Eight of the A-Level participants also discussed their career plans, although three said that they were uncertain what they wanted to study at university or do as a career and had chosen A-Levels to keep their options open rather than specialising in one subject. This suggests that regardless of academic choices, the majority
of young people have thought about their longer term progression, and that A-Levels may be an attractive option to those unsure about their future for the transferrable skills they are perceived to offer.

These findings suggest two key areas of interest. Firstly, despite the supposed parity of the two qualifications, A-Levels are still seen by influential figures in young people’s lives such as teachers and parents as a more desirable form of capital in academic terms, and are being recommended to students predicted to achieve above-average grades in their GCSEs. This suggests that whilst academic qualifications may be “a weak currency” (Bourdieu, 1977; p.507), within the schooling system they are still perceived to carry a significant value, and the cultures held by the students who took part in the study had seemingly been passed on by their experiences throughout their prior educational careers. The participants appeared aware of how A-Levels were being promoted by teachers, family and friends as more suitable for the elite, academic few, and the impact of this on their narratives is discussed further below in addressing my final research question. However, the stated desire of almost all of the participants (all of whom were drawn from the same, largely working class catchment area) to study further at university regardless of their chosen programme indicates that learners from “culturally unflavoured classes” (Bourdieu, 1977; p.495) are no longer ruling themselves out of educational success, and indicates a possible change in the field of 16-19 education and the claims that may be made there.

Secondly, whilst a clear link was evident in the BTEC narratives between the vocational course they had chosen and the world of work that one day awaited them, this was discussed in a positive rather than negative way. Participants spoke of the skills they were developing as not only allowing them access to HE, but also providing entry into a skilled, rewarding and fulfilling career and giving them the edge over others who had not followed a
similar pathway. Again, this is considered below in answer to my fourth and final research question.

*Research Question Two: What ideas and attitudes do learners hold about their chosen qualification on entering the programme, and where have these come from?*

There was greater similarity of response between the two cohorts in response to this question than the first, particularly in recognising the new course represented a step-up from GCSEs in terms of difficulty and workload. Students from both cohorts also talked about being given greater freedom than at school in terms of managing their own time and workload, and being treated as an adult by their teachers. One explanation for the commonality of responses may lie with the information and guidance given to learners prior to starting the course, both from their teachers at school and the college tutors they have met when attending interviews, open evenings, taster days and enrolment sessions. Tutors at NCFE are required to give certain information to new and prospective students about the nature of the course, and it seemed that much of this had been taken on board and then reproduced as part of the learners' own narratives; “our speech… is filled with others' words” (Bakhtin, 1986; p,89).

However, another factor that seems to be at work is a desire amongst the LITP’s participants to make clear their position as college students, regardless of academic programme, as opposed to school pupils. Across the data, learners described their expectations of how their college course would differ from school, embellishing their new status as college students and their separateness from the school practices they were leaving behind, with – for example - three participants specifically stating they would no longer be “spoon-fed” information like they had been at school. These learners appear to be negotiating their place in the new educational structures within which they now operate by defining their position in
relation to other groups outside the college system: “I see the school children on the bus, and I feel older and wiser” (Student L). There was also some evidence of participants positioning themselves in relation to learners on different pathways within the college and defining their own identities in terms of difference from others, as discussed further below.

Research Question Three: What is the impact of policy and other existing discourses upon the culture and practice of studying a particular programme, and what effect does this have on learner identities?

The data suggested that whilst both cohorts attended the same college and were studying at the same level, A-Level and vocational qualifications each have a distinct culture with its own particular forms of practice. This appeared attributable to three factors – the dispositions of the students, discussed further in relation to the fourth research question; their awareness of existing discourses on the perceived value of each pathway; and the organisation and routines in place within NCFE and within the format of the qualification itself which structure the agency of the respondents. These structural factors include the holding of separate Parents’ Evenings, Induction Days, Taster Days and Open Evenings for A-Level and BTEC students, but the most significant seems to be the timetabling system, which is designed by the college but largely determined by the qualification. A-Level students study three or four different subjects, for which they have different teachers and groups, whilst BTEC learners may well have different teachers for different modules but have all classes with the same group of learners. This was reflected in the narratives, where A-Level students spoke of having a wider circle of friends drawn from across different classes while the BTEC students appeared to have a smaller circle of friends to whom they had become very close as a result of their single study group. There was no mention of BTEC students from a particular subject group mixing with other BTEC students, suggesting that rather than a wider programme identity, the BTEC pathway may consist of a number of smaller groupings based around the
different curriculum areas and linked through subject interests – the IT BTEC students, for example, spoke only of their peers in their study group.

The BTEC students also spoke of how close they had become to their tutors, which could be attributable to the timetabling system and pedagogical approach used within this programme or the dispositions of the learners themselves. Most contact time with teachers on vocational programmes is structured via a workshop-based delivery model, where learners work independently on assignments they have been set with support from tutors as and when required during the session. This was confirmed by the members of the staff focus group, with Teacher 5 commenting that “voc is like family; A-Level isn’t” and all the participants agreeing they had noticed a greater camaraderie between BTEC students than amongst the A-Level students who might well have four different classes per day with four completely different sets of people.

As well as timetabling constraints, it appeared from the learner narratives that the physical layout of NCFE also played a part in creating and maintaining separate cultures. NCFE is a relatively large college, comprising ten different buildings (including administration and sports facilities) in close proximity, arranged in a campus-style formation. Only two of these buildings are split fairly equally between delivery of A-Level and vocational qualifications, and these house the different pathways on different floors or in separate parts of the building. Some of this is down to practicalities, as a number of the vocational subjects such as engineering, IT and construction require specific facilities rather than using the more standard classrooms that are appropriate for most A-Level subjects. However, Student G’s comment on seeing male students (“boys”) play-fighting in the Construction Centre when she had to go in there to find a computer to work on - “it looked like school” – suggests this physical division between A-Level and vocational students is also encouraging the
development of separate identities amongst different cohorts which the students then contribute to maintaining. Student G’s attitude here supports Bourdieu’s belief that “all social structures are generated in practice by participating social agents” (Robbins, 2000; p. 26); accommodation at NCFE may keep different cohorts largely separate, but the behaviour of the learners is what maintains and perpetuates this particular order.

The LITP’s use of learner narratives and of the staff focus group revealed an emphasis on the workplace experience and skills offered by the BTEC, evident in the BTEC learners’ discussion of the qualification they had chosen and confirmed in the staff focus group: “the link to work is made clearer” (T3). This is perhaps unsurprising given the vocational nature of this programme, with many courses (including Childcare, a subject studied by three of the participants) following a structure of a week in college followed by a week on work placement throughout the year. Meanwhile, whilst A-Levels teachers at NCFE have to indicate on schemes of work where employability skills are incorporated into their lessons, these are often couched in terms of general qualities such as communication, teamwork and analytical skills. This variation in focus implies that A-Levels and BTECs have different claims regarding what they set out to do which impact upon their respective pedagogies. A-Levels offer a different kind of knowledge claim, one which is not always directly linked to the world of work and employment and which is “more about analysis and discussion” according to Teacher 3 in the staff focus group. The question of whether these different knowledge claims and ways of being in the world led to the students in the study espousing their identities in a particular way is considered as part of my fourth and final research question.
Research Question Four: How do students on different academic programmes narrate their educational experiences, and is a sense of collective identity evident amongst different cohorts?

Whilst there was some commonality of response from learners on each distinct academic programme, the data suggested that each student cohort was far from being a homogenous group, as depicted in the eight different composite learner profiles. These profiles illustrate the variety of learners within NCFE, and were directly linked to the different experiences of the transition process espoused by the 24 interview participants. The focus group conducted with staff in the setting confirmed these different learner types are not restricted to one particular programme – “I can see my students evenly across them all” (T2) – with the exception of the Second Chance category, which was felt to apply exclusively to the vocational learners. Members of the focus group also agreed that whilst Second Chance students were only found among the BTEC learners, other types of learner were also associated more with one academic programme than another: the Love of Learning student was felt to be more prevalent among A-Level learners, whilst a BTEC cohort would be more likely to include the Practical One, the Subject Specialist and the Get Me Where I Need to Go. One focus group member commented they had never seen a BTEC learner switch to an A-Level course, a one-way trend supported by the participants in my study, four of whom had moved from A-Level to BTEC. This pattern suggests a two-tiered system in the perceived value of these qualifications – values that the learners themselves were clearly aware of and which affected the ways in which they narrated their experiences of academic transition.

The most noticeable impact on the ways in which each cohort told their stories was a sense that A-Levels were harder than BTECs, making them more suitable for high-achievers in the examination-based school system and – by implication – better than their BTEC counterpart. Whilst an awareness of this lack of parity was evident in the narratives of both cohorts, the
Impact of this understanding manifested differently for each programme, with the A-Level participants more likely to evoke a feeling of difference between themselves and the vocational cohort, and the BTEC respondents more commonly acknowledging the inferior public perception of their chosen course before going on to explain why it was the right choice for them regardless. There appeared to be a certain amount of misrecognition here, particularly amongst A-Level students, who espoused the perception that their course was the most suitable programme for academic students wishing to go on to university study, but with little discussion of why that might be. The data also suggested that if separation exists between the two pathways, the agency of the participants had helped build and maintain the divisions already apparent in the physical structures of NCFE, an idea discussed further below.

Summary of Key Findings and their Importance

The empirical data offer a valuable insight into recent shifts within the field of 16-19 education. Despite attempts to widen participation in further and higher education by raising the school leaving age and creating more university places, it appears divisions remain between different qualifications and institutions, with learners contributing to these by identifying themselves as being suitable or unsuitable for particular courses based on perceived academic ability rather than other qualities inherent to the course or their own dispositions. This inevitably leads to learners sometimes finding themselves on the wrong course, particularly – according to the data collected in the LITP – those recommended to do A-Levels by family or teachers but for whom this was not the most suitable option. This is seen in the narratives of the BTEC learners who had started A-Levels and either failed the year or switched course during the year, and the comments in the focus group that Second Chance learners were invariably BTEC students. The data raises some important issues, such as what happens to BTEC learners who would be better suited to A-Level, or to those
without the resilience to push for a second chance. Similarly, the espousal of the influence of parents and teachers in the student narratives poses interesting questions over what is it about education that makes society value the old over the new and the familiar over the less familiar, and why word of mouth, particularly amongst peer groups, carries such weight. The LITP’s findings also prompt concerns over the wider implications of the stratification of the education system as discussed in Chapter Two. NCFE is physically organised through its buildings and its practices to create a binary between the level three qualifications available, a separation reflected in the learner narratives in the lack of interaction between A-Level and BTEC students and the stated recognition of differences between the two pathways. This raises questions over where this separation comes from and how and when such ideas are conveyed to learners, suggesting that policy shapes practice in ways that require further research.

On a positive note, the data illustrate the adaptive nature of habitus, and indicate that transition can be a time of change and opportunity. Whilst it must be acknowledged that students who volunteer their own time to participate in research may be those with more positive experiences of transition, a sense of opportunity was highly evident across the data, with only Student A saying that he missed school. The narratives suggested the move to college had provided the chance to form new social groups and to mature as individuals in relationships with teachers and workloads, suggesting a tension between the positive nature of the participants’ experiences and the power structures and discourses already in place. BTEC participants appeared to have adapted to a new environment in which they could assume the identity of successful student, suggesting that whilst a two-tier qualification system still exists, the agency of these learners in transforming their habitus to that of a learner doing well may have the ability to begin changing educational structures and altering perceptions that vocational habitus – if such a thing exists – is necessarily a negative disposition to possess. Vocational habitus does not exist outside of practice, and so is
revealed through practice and/or through what people say is their practice. Through the positivity of their narratives, these learners appeared to be rejecting the traditional academic model enshrined into educational structures and establishing their own form of currency that they perceived would be of future value both in further study and in the workplace.

**Implication of Findings**

*Implications for the teaching profession and for relationships between educational contexts*

The learner narratives collected in the LITP offer a valuable perspective on the transition process from school to college. The participants had, by their very status as college students several months into the academic year, already demonstrated some success in negotiating this transition period, although four of the BTEC participants had initially attempted to become A-Level students and one A-Level participant was resitting the year after failing to successfully make the transition at her first attempt. All FE colleges expect to lose a certain number of students in the first few weeks of the academic year; the census date on which students count towards official retention statistics is six weeks after their start date, and during this time it is common for some learners to move to another college or sixth form, switch to another course within the same institution, or leave college altogether to follow another path such as apprenticeship. However, in the current period of funding cuts and increased competition between providers, it is important for educational institutions to ensure where possible that learners understand the course they have chosen and have sound motivations and realistic expectations for pursuing this route.

The data collected in the LITP suggest there are a number of things institutions can do to help students choose the right course and set appropriate expectations before starting college, such as taster days and information evenings, and certain support mechanisms that
can be put in place after the student has enrolled to help them integrate into their new
environment. Three of the participants in the LITP were members of the SAG and spoke of
the wide range of friends they had made as a result, and Student 2 talked of his pride at
being elected Chair of a group he and his fellow IT students had set up themselves which
aimed to get local school pupils into the college on visits in order to ease the transition
process, saying he himself would have liked to be able to take advantage of something
similar whilst at school. Many A-Level and BTEC students at NCFE – including some of
those interviewed for the study – volunteer to take part in college information evenings,
where they talk to year 11 students about their experiences of college. Student D specifically
mentioned twice that for her, the transition from school to college had been made “less
overwhelming” by the chance to attend these information evenings and taster days, while
Student L echoed this feeling that she had handled the transition process successfully
because she was “expecting the jump” due to the events she had attended before starting
college.

Thus the LITP finds that the process of inviting students into college for open evenings and
taster days represents good practice in easing the transition process through the providing of
information and the setting of realistic expectations. However, some of the learner narratives
suggest that more could be done in schools in this regard: Student G stated she would have
liked more guidance about what subjects might be best for her “next step…school didn’t tell
me enough”, whilst Student H said she thought that “high school didn’t give enough advice
about the jump from GCSE to A-Level and didn’t prepare me for the work you have to
do…more knowledge would have helped”. Student I stated the process “wasn’t explained
that well”, as she hadn’t been told at school that certain A-Levels (and indeed, GCSEs) were
needed for certain university courses. All three of these students had chosen the A-Level
pathway and two had done so based on their teachers’ assessment of their academic
capability, indicating that advice should be more specifically tailored to the individual when
discussing options. None of the 24 participants mentioned any kind of careers guidance being available to them at school, again suggesting that this may be an area from which young people could benefit despite a number of recent cuts to advice services such as Connexions (DfE, 2010). As none of the fieldwork was conducted in secondary schools, this would be an interesting area of further research. At the very least, the findings of the study suggest that relationships between practitioners in colleges and schools could be strengthened in order to provide a clearer understanding of each other’s educational contexts and to facilitate the organisation and promotion of college activities to school leavers in the process of considering their academic options.

Implications of the Professional Doctorate and my role as practitioner/researcher

The data collection for the LITP took place in the college where I am employed as a lecturer. This raises important questions about what it means to conduct research in your own institution, and thus it is pertinent to reflect on my role in the study, what I have learned, and what the process of undergoing a professional doctorate means to me as a practitioner. Recent years have seen a number of research papers on the perceived value of the professional doctorate, with Scott et al (2004) finding that students electing to pursue such a pathway espoused either extrinsic motivations in the form of career development or as a form of professional initiation, or an intrinsic motivation to seek an intellectual challenge. The firm link between research and practice suggests that the completion of such a doctorate is likely to have an impact both on the professional life of that individual and, collectively, on the profession in which the individual is engaged. Fink (2006) draws on a variety of sources in concluding that the professional doctorate not only provides the individual learner with the opportunity to conduct research relevant to both practitioners and academics, but also forms a key component in a growing knowledge economy where relevant, high quality information
is available. Thus the LITP contributes to a growing tradition that recognises the value of an alternative form of doctoral study and its ability to form an important knowledge base.

This is not to say that ethnographic research is without potential issues, particularly when collecting qualitative data which must be analysed and interpreted by the researcher-practitioner. Participants are potentially known to the researcher and vice-versa; this was the case in the LITP, where ten of the A-Level interviewees were students who saw me twice a week in the capacity of English teacher. This situation emphasises the need for absolute transparency in articulating one’s role in specific contexts, particularly where this role carries implications for power relationships between researcher and participants (Mercer, 2007). It was made clear to the students participating in the LITP that no mention would be made of the study in lesson time and that they would be treated no differently because of their involvement, and it was explained both in written and verbal form prior to and during the interview that I was talking to them as an external researcher collecting data for a university thesis rather than in any capacity relating to the college. This indicates the fluid nature of identity for the researcher who is both an outsider and insider, a position that requires the transparency discussed above but which also offers the opportunity to observe a particular phenomenon from within its educational context. The clearly-documented development and use of the MERITS Plus Model, grounded in both theory and empirical fieldwork, has allowed me to maintain a professional distance from the participants and the setting, and minimise the risk of bias when interpreting the data. I have adopted a high level of reflexivity by providing my own autobiography and taking steps to acknowledge and mitigate any preconceptions I may have held due to my own background and personal values (Spindler and Spindler, 1982), such as regular documented discussions with my supervisor.
On a personal level, the completion of this doctorate has allowed me both to draw on my professional experience as a practitioner and to systematically research an issue about which only anecdotal evidence was previously available. NCFE has a substantial population of both A-Level and BTEC students, each of whom carries the same level of funding and contributes equally to the outcomes of the college when being measured against retention, success rates and so on. Yet the way in which the college is physically structured suggests that these students are not equal, and are often segregated in a manner that implies difference rather than a shared college ethos: students are housed in different buildings, and are catered for separately at events such as information sessions and parents’ evenings. Most staff teach either A-Level or BTEC, rarely both, and the two different pathways have different timetables and separate pastoral tutor groups. As an A-Level teacher, I have no contact with BTEC students on a day-to-day basis, nor the staff who teach them. Thus this study has been important to me as a practitioner in two ways: by giving me the opportunity to meet students and staff from the vocational pathway and thus expand my own personal and professional understanding and networks, and by allowing me to research what impact – if any - the physical divisions within college structures have upon the individual identities of the learners who study at NCFE. In addition, the issues I have looked at in this study surrounding the power and status of certain qualifications have broader echoes in terms of conducting a professional doctorate, and have implications in considering how the research community approaches the different ways in which knowledge can best be represented, and how universities and employers give recognition to the relationship between the demonstration of skills and knowledge and the wider cultural acknowledgement of qualifications.
Implications for students and their families

This study has young people at its heart, giving participants the chance to narrate their own experiences of academic transition and thus contributes to our knowledge of how students self-report school discourses. Specifically, the LITP focuses on young people doing well educationally – those who have achieved high enough grades in their GCSEs to progress to level three study, and who are committed to their chosen courses as a stepping stone to HE or a prestigious and/or rewarding career. These learners are an under-researched group, and the study suggests that there is more work to be done in ensuring young people are supported in their academic choices and aspirations, and that their diversity is recognised.

The data indicate that whilst certain characteristics, attitudes and dispositions appear more commonly amongst learners on particular pathways, A-Level and BTEC students are far from being homogenous groups. Realistically, only two level three study routes are available to the majority of learners aged 16-19, as relatively few advanced level apprenticeships currently exist and only a small percentage of school sixth forms and colleges offer the International Baccalaureate. The implications of such a narrow range of provision is considered further in the policy section that follows, but its impact on the study’s participants was evident in the data, and raises questions about who produces the discourses around which young people make their choices, and whose interests they serve.

Some of the narratives suggested that agency can be compromised by structure, with learners talking of the influence of teachers, parents and other older relatives and – at times – implying that their own autonomy had been compromised. The educational and social structures which apply to these young people appear to both influence and restrict their academic choices, particularly in terms of the values assigned to different courses, with the data suggesting that A-Levels are still seen by teachers and parents as the more appropriate option for high-achieving students aiming to go to university, and therefore the more
desirable. Eight A-Level participants volunteered their parents preferring them to choose A-Levels as a key motivation for picking their course, with Student K saying her parents “pushed” her into this route. The three BTEC students who had done A-Levels for a year and failed and the one who had done A-Levels for two weeks before switching to a BTEC all cited parental influence as the reason for their original choice of course, suggesting these young people had placed greater significance on the beliefs and values of their parents than on their own sense of autonomy. As most 16-year-olds entering level three study are still financially reliant on their families, such influence is perhaps unsurprising. However, that at least four of the 24 students had originally made an unsuitable choice raises questions about how many learners lack the resilience of these particular students to recognise their mistake and change course, and who perhaps drop out of the education system altogether as a result. The issue of learner resilience has become an area of interest for both researchers and practitioners in recent years, particularly since the “successful” learner will have to undergo a series of academic transitions in their student lifecycle. If resilience can be fostered in learners at an early age, these future transitions can be normalised to some extent, with educational institutions playing a key part in understanding the information, support and guidance that students need in order to experience a successful transition to their next stage of study.

*Implications for policy and the broader education system*

The question of equality – or the lack of it – between qualifications of the same academic level (in the case of this study, level three) has been on the political agenda for some time, and forms part of a wider debate about the perceived value of different forms of knowledge and the contexts in which they are delivered. These discourses are not limited to the 16-19 sector, and traditionally highlight the value of formal academic knowledge delivered in university contexts rather than practical knowledge from the field of professional practice.
(see, for example, Young 2007 and Hordern 2016), although there is a growing argument that knowledge is powerful in use rather than in itself which suggests the bringing together of different knowledge traditions (see, for example, Maton 2014). The hierarchies enacted within these wider discourses feed into educational policy, which in turn helps shape practice. Both A-Levels and BTECs have undergone reforms during the last few years as outlined in Chapter Two, with the stated aim of providing learners leaving school with a range of high-quality options in the form of A-Levels, BTECs or Apprenticeships. In practice, though, the lack of parity remains. Wolf’s (2011) government-commissioned review of Vocational Education found “that 30 or 40 years ago vocational routes offered young people better and more secure prospects than is the case today” (p.9), with the then Secretary of State for Education Gove (2011) agreeing in the same report that since the establishment of the Royal Commission of 1851, “policy-makers have struggled with our failure to provide young people with a proper technical and practical education of a kind that other nations can boast” (p.5). This report found that lack of clear information was one of the main causes of poor quality vocational education, yet five years later, the then Education Secretary was still calling on schools to promote vocational routes on an equal footing with the more traditionally academic courses, and stating concerns that too many schools were promoting vocational education only to those pupils considered less able (Morgan, 2016). The data collected in the LITP supports the idea that some schools are actively promoting A-Levels as the more suitable route for students predicted higher GCSE grades, indicating that despite efforts to level the playing field, some qualifications continue to be positioned as more desirable and valuable than others and that these ideas are being communicated to learners.

The fact that these values appeared so deeply embedded in the learner narratives collected in the LITP indicates these students had learned about the validity of particular forms of education much earlier in the schooling system than during the transition from level two to
level three, and this raises the question of what exactly students learn about validity during their first years of education. Learners applying for level three courses have already been given predicted GCSE grades by their teachers as well as receiving guidance on likely outcomes through performance in school structures such as mock examinations, and the data collected in the LITP revealed that many of the participants had chosen their level three course based on these predictions and – in some cases – raised or lowered their expectations accordingly. This suggests that such values are so entrenched within the habitus that learners are to some extent self-selecting in ruling themselves out of possible academic pathways, and that the perceived value of particular forms of education and an individual’s suitability for one qualification over another has been formed due to earlier educational experiences. The LITP’s findings also raise important questions for future research over how universities and employers give recognition to particular qualifications, and the relationship between the demonstration of different forms of skill and knowledge and the wider cultural acknowledgement of qualifications and credentials.

**Implications for research**

The LITP carries important implications for the research community, both in its findings and through the methodological development of the Merits Plus model. The study’s findings carry echoes of wider issues around the power status of certain qualifications as outlined above, and how the research community approaches the different ways in which knowledge can best be represented. A study of this scale cannot fully address such issues, and thus different contextualisations are needed in order to consider these further. The methodological approach adopted in the LITP using the MERITS Plus model offers a fully transferrable theoretical framework for understanding the impact academic transition can have on individual learner identities, and whilst this has been piloted and developed with level three learners in an FE college, its potential applications are far more wide-ranging.
thanks to the model’s distinctive ability to contextualise and probe data using Bourdieu’s thinking tools. Chapter Eight discussed the use of the model in a secondary school environment to examine the transition into study at level two, when students must choose and adapt to their GCSE programme of study, and in an HE environment to support the transition into undergraduate study at level four. However, the model could also be transferred to transitions in other contexts – the move to a new job in the workplace, for example, or the move from junior school to secondary school at age 11. Collection of data within a range of contexts would allow consideration of the issues raised in the LITP over the perceived values of different forms of knowledge and how and when these are embedded. The methodology applied in this study would need minor adaptation to work in these other contexts; children going to secondary school, for example, have little choice over the subjects immediately available to them and limited options in terms of which school they attend. However, the model’s ability to help understand the transition process for individuals of any age through its multi-layered approach means that the LITP makes an important contribution not only to the field of 16-19 education but also to the wider field of transition pedagogy.

The MERITS Plus model could also be used with different groups of learners or at different times to look in greater detail at other issues raised in this study about learner resilience. For example, whilst the learners in the LITP represent young people doing well in the education system, four of the participants had originally chosen A-Levels before changing course to a BTEC, and one A-Level student was repeating her first year. These learners had the emotional resilience to recognise they had made a mistake – four of them in their choice of course; one in her failure to adopt appropriate study habits - and to change their course or their behaviour accordingly, but this may not be the case with all learners who do not immediately succeed and who may drop out of education altogether as a result. This area could be examined further using the MERITS Plus model to interview students who have
found it difficult to adapt to their new level of study – those who have changed course, or
failed their first year, or left college altogether. This would enable a better understanding of
why some students fail to survive the important transition to level three, with a view to
providing greater support and advice to those at risk and ultimately ensuring that more
learners have the chance to fulfil their academic potential. On a related note, educational
providers could adopt the MERITS Plus model as part of a longitudinal approach,
interviewing learners throughout their studies with particular focus on those times of the year
when learners are most at risk of leaving their course, such as after the Christmas break or
at the start of their second year. Whilst the collection of further data may well reveal new and
additional nuances in the development of the model and its implications for research, in an
era of increasing marketisation within education the MERITS Plus model is a vital tool for
understanding and supporting academic transition.
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Calling all first year AS and BTEC students!

If you are a first year A-Level student or first year level 3 BTEC student who joined (Northlands College) this September, you are invited to take part in a research project currently being undertaken by one of the teachers in college.

You will be required to take part in one 30 minute interview between October 2014 and January 2015 at a time scheduled to suit you within the college day. You may also be asked to take part in a further interview when you start your second year in college. The interview process will ask you to talk about your personal experiences of moving from school to college, along with your reasons for choosing your course.

There is no financial or other incentive for taking part in the study, but it will give you the chance to voice your thoughts as well as providing valuable experience of taking part in a research project.

To find out more, please email (name removed) on (email address removed). Please do not ask (name removed) questions about the project directly as she is simply sending out information on a colleague’s behalf.

Thank you in advance for your interest in the project.
Appendix Two: email sent by agent to potential participants

Dear (name)

My name is (name removed), and I am a member of the Humanities and Communication department. I am contacting you on behalf of my colleague Liz Gregory, who is conducting a research project in college as part of her doctoral studies at Manchester University. Full details of her research project are attached in an information sheet that should help you decide whether you would like to take a further part in the study by participating in a 30 minute interview. You may then be asked to participate in a further 30 minute interview at the start of your second year.

The reason for my involvement is to help with the recruitment process. If you would like to volunteer to take part in the project, you should reply to me on this email address within two weeks, rather than speaking to Liz directly. Doing it this way means that Liz will not know if you decide to decline to participate, and you should therefore feel under absolutely no pressure to participate if you don’t want to.

A maximum of twelve AS and twelve BTEC students are required for the project, as well as reserve students who will be called upon if any of the original participants drop out for any reason. If more than this number volunteers then I will select participants at random, allowing for a reasonable split between genders. Names of participants will then be passed to Liz and she will contact you individually to discuss the project further and answer any questions you may have.

Regards

(name removed)
Appendix Three: Participant Information Sheet for Interviewees

Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a study as part of a student project – I am currently undertaking a doctoral qualification at Manchester University and wish to carry out a study of student attitudes towards the course they have chosen as part of my research. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the study?

Elizabeth Gregory, The Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

Title of the study

“A Study of Learners’ Self-Perception in the FE Environment: investigating whether a sense of shared identity affects the ways in which learners narrate their own educational experiences”.

What is the aim of the study?

My aim is to investigate student identity issues within two different learner cohorts (A-Level and BTEC students) in terms of how they narrate their academic choices, their experiences of the academic transition from level two to level three and from school to college, and the impact (if any) this process of transition has had upon their identity. Specifically I am interested in whether there is a sense of a shared identity in how learners understand their sense of themselves as students following different programmes of study.

Why have I been chosen?

You have contacted (name removed) to request further information about the study after seeing posters displayed in college. She has selected 12 AS students and 12 BTEC students at random from all the responses received.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?
You would be asked to take part in an individual interview conducted by myself, lasting a maximum of thirty minutes. This will involve you discussing your reasons for choosing your programme of study and your expectations of the course, and whether the course has met your expectations. It is not anticipated that the experience will cause any risk, pain or discomfort. You may then be asked to take part in a further 30 minute interview at the start of your second year of study.

**What happens to the data collected?**

The responses from all 24 interviews will be collated – I will be looking for any commonality in the attitudes and experiences expressed, as well as using anonymous quotes to illustrate student opinions. These will then form the basis of some fictional student profiles that you will be asked to discuss if you take part in a second interview.

**How is confidentiality maintained?**

Students’ names will be used during the interview process, but will then be replaced with an alternative identifier in order to break the link between data and individuals who can be personally identified. These identifiers will be kept in a locked desk drawer at my private residence. Electronic data will be stored on a securely encrypted memory key, and audio recordings will be deleted once the interviews have been fully transcribed. Direct quotations reproduced in the final report will be used anonymously, using only the identifier rather than the student name.

**What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

Participation is entirely voluntary - it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

**Will I be paid for participating in the study?**

There is no financial or other incentive for taking part in the study.

**What is the duration of the study?**

You will be asked to take part in one individual interview, conducted by myself, that will last a maximum of 30 minutes. This process will then be repeated at the start of your second year of study should you choose to continue your participation in the study.

**Where will the study be conducted?**

The interviews will take place within a classroom at college and will not require you to travel to any other location.

**Will the outcomes of the study be published?**

The data collected from the interviews will later be included within my university thesis as well as possibly in other publications, but results will be presented anonymously so that neither the college nor any of the study participants could be identified.

**Criminal Records Check**
As a qualified teacher, I have undergone a satisfactory criminal records check that enables me to work with young people.

Contact for further information

If you would like to contact me for advice about the research project, please email me at [email address anonymised] or telephone me on [number anonymised].

What if something goes wrong?

You are welcome to approach me for help or advice at any stage of the procedure, either before or after the interview.

If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093
Appendix Four: Consent Form for Interviewees

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below.

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet provided when I first expressed my interest in the study, and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

5. I agree that any data collected may be passed to other researchers
6. I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals.

I agree to take part in the above project

Name of participant ___________________________ Date ______________ Signature ______________

Name of person taking consent ___________________________ Date ______________ Signature ______________
Appendix Five: Development of the MERITS Model

This appendix describes the three research papers undertaken as part of my professional doctorate, and how each has contributed to the current study. I also outline the development of the MERITS model during pilot fieldwork for the LITP, from its inception as a five-stage framework during RP2 (Gregory, 2013a) to the addition of the sixth stage, Stories and Synthesis, during RP3 (Gregory, 2013b). Its evolution into the MERITS Model Plus with the addition of a layer of Bourdieusian analysis and the use of the Stories and Synthesis stage to produce composite learner profiles is explored in the main thesis.

Pilot Studies and Early Fieldwork

At the start of my professional doctorate, my research interests mirrored my professional practice in that they were largely centred on the A-Level qualification. RP1 (Gregory, 2012) provided a literature review of materials (including government policy documents, academic research and media coverage in the popular press) pertaining to A-Levels, and aimed to define their role within the education system as a method of differentiating between students with different academic abilities and facilitating their progression into Higher Education. This paper found that despite increasing media criticism of the A-Level for being too easy (due largely to year-on-year rises in the pass rate and the number of high grades awarded), the predominant perception remained that this was the most appropriate qualification for more academic students – the gold standard of level three provision. Of course, as Snapper (2007) points out, “the Gold Standard’ is a conveniently rousing phrase for media and politicians to lead reactionary campaigns on, implying nostalgia for a time before ‘dumbing-down’ and ‘the decline of standards” (p.14), and the drive to protect these standards – and the reputation of the A-Level as an elite qualification - has already led to the scrapping of the modular system introduced in 2000 and a return to the linear, examination-based structure of the original qualification. It was noticeable from the literatures consulted for this paper that
the young people actually involved in the education system were rarely consulted on their views (see, for example, Hodgson and Spours 2003), and my subsequent two research papers allowed me to address this relative silence by conducting fieldwork with learners at NCFE in order to collect their views on the qualification they had chosen.

Research papers two and three (Gregory, 2013a and 2013b) were based on two separate projects with learners aged 16-19 following an A-Level programme, and piloted interviews and questionnaires as methods of data collection as well as contributing empirical data centred around learner voice. For the first of these, I conducted interviews with five students, of whom three were at the start of the two-year course and two were at the mid-point of their studies, with the aim of establishing their perceptions of the A-Level as a qualification and their experiences of the transition from GCSE to a new higher level of study. At the start of the interview, each participant was invited to read through six fictional student profiles that I had written based on my own professional teaching experiences of the different “types” of learner I had encountered in the setting, and to highlight any aspects of these profiles with which they could identify. These scenarios encompassed different motivations, expectations and experiences of college, and each participant was then encouraged to discuss these as part of the interview, in which the questions were built around the original MERIT model (Motivations, Expectations, Reality, Identity and Transition).

This study provided key preparation for the current research, not only through the piloting of the interview process but through the use of fictional learner profiles and the development of the MERIT model. Such a framework was important in terms of managing my dual role as practitioner-researcher – some of the participants were known to me, and the scenarios discussed in the interviews were written from my own personal and professional experience, and thus there was a danger that I would “enter[s] the research process for particular
reasons and with a set of beliefs and assumptions about the people, the context and the issue of their research” (Bold, 2012; p.38) that could make my findings less credible. The use of the MERIT model helped mitigate this possibility by conceptualising the study and lessening my own personal impact by locating the data and its codification within the existing literatures on transition and identity.

**Addition of sixth element**

Whilst the original MERIT model proved helpful in understanding the impact of the transition process upon the identity of individual students, it lacked the ability to provide an overview of the range of different experiences and identities that may exist within an educational setting at any one time. This became particularly evident during my third research paper, where views were gathered from a larger sample than previously and where more variation was visible across the responses. This paper aimed to address one of the limitations of the previous pilot study, where all five participants were studying humanities-based subjects and all were enrolled on English A-Level, and also allowed me to pilot another research tool through the use of online questionnaires. These were completed by 40 AS-Level students and were again based around the MERIT model; as the aim of this study was to test the validity of the model as both a conceptual and an analytical framework, these questions were very similar to those used during the interviews in the previous study.

The analysis of the questionnaires made it clear that the model needed some development if it was to successfully address the range and variety in how the participants narrated their stories of academic transition. In order to reflect the larger sample size and the subsequently broader range of positioning within the data, a sixth element was added to the existing model: the letter S, to represent “Stories and Synthesis” and allow me to draw individual narratives and experiences together, thereby exploring whether a range of student “types” might exist.
across the setting regardless of individual course choices. The potential of this sixth element was not fully realised until the current study, where the use of composite learner profiles has allowed me to draw upon individual narratives to produce a number of “stories” illustrating the range of learner types at NCFE.
## Appendix Six: BTEC MERITS Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations</th>
<th>Why does an individual choose to study a BTEC at level three rather than follow other academic pathways or apply for work or apprenticeships? What do they perceive to be the value of such a choice? Are these motivations largely extrinsic or intrinsic, or a combination of the two?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>What preconceived ideas (if any) might an individual hold before starting a BTEC programme of study? Where do these come from? How do they expect BTEC lesson content and delivery to differ from GCSE classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>How does the programme match up to these expectations in actuality? Has the shift from GCSE to BTEC been challenging in terms of pedagogical changes? Do students think that GCSEs have adequately prepared them for the rigours of studying a level 3 qualification?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>How do BTEC students describe themselves? Is there any commonality in how individual students describe themselves, suggesting a collective identity amongst different groups of learners? Do they perceive that their identity may have changed since becoming a BTEC student, and if so, in what way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>How effectively do BTEC students feel that a/ GCSEs have prepared them for study at level three, and b/ their BTEC is preparing them for study at Higher Education? What examples can they provide of skills they have developed through the process of moving from GCSE studies to BTEC?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories and Synthesis</td>
<td>How do individual students bring together these feelings and experiences in order to narrate the story of their academic transition? Do they use similar words or phrases to suggest a commonality of experience and identity during the narration of these stories?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Seven: Interview Schedule - AS Students

Subjects studied at A-Level:

1. Why did you choose to study a full-time A-Level programme, as opposed to:
   a/ another level three programme such as BTEC and b/ looking for employment/apprenticeship?
   Prompts: What advice (if any) was provided to you by your school in terms of the options available to you after your GCSEs?
   Where did you think A-Levels could take you in the future?
   At what stage did you make the decision to study A-Levels?
   Did your family or friends play a part in your decision?

2. What were your expectations of studying A-Levels in college?
   Prompts: What were you most looking forward to about starting college?
   How did you think A-Levels would differ from GCSEs before you started college?
   Who or what was influential in creating these expectations?
   How did you think the college environment might differ from school?

3. Please explain in your own words how your experience so far has measured up to these expectations.
   Prompts: How well do you think your GCSEs prepared you for your AS year?
   How do you spend your time at college when you are not in class?
   Is there anything about your experience of moving from school to college you would change if you could?
   Do you feel you have changed in any way since starting college?
Appendix Eight: Interview Schedule - Vocational Students

Subject studied:

1. Why did you choose to study a full-time vocational programme, as opposed to: a/ another level three programme such as A-Levels and b/ looking for employment/apprenticeship?
   Prompts: What advice (if any) was provided to you by your school in terms of the options available to you after your GCSEs?
   Where did you think a vocational programme could take you in the future?
   At what stage did you make the decision to study this programme?
   Did your family or friends play a part in your decision?

2. What were your expectations of studying a vocational programme in college?
   Prompts:
   What were you most looking forward to about starting college?
   How did you think studying a full-time vocational programme would differ from GCSEs before you started college?
   Who or what was influential in creating these expectations?
   How did you think the college environment might differ from school?

3. Please explain in your own words how your experience so far has measured up to these expectations.
   Prompts: How well do you think your GCSEs prepared you for your first year of studying in college?
   How do you spend your time at college when you are not in class?
   Is there anything about your experience of moving from school to college you would change if you could?
   Do you feel you have changed in any way since starting college?
Appendix Nine – Transcription of an extract from Student F’s narrative

The following extract is transcribed from the end of Student F’s narrative, and is provided as an example of the data collected in the learner interviews and how the first five elements of the MERITS framework were used to highlight key ideas. Some elements are reflected in this extract more than others due to its timing within the interview. I have added basic punctuation but otherwise have recorded the conversation exactly, and included verbal fillers in order to reflect the speech patterns and thought processes of the interviewee.

[In response to the third and final question: Please explain in your own words how your experience so far has measured up to these expectations.]

I think I’ve definitely become more mature, erm..more independent, for certain. And I’ve grown in confidence as well, I mean, it sounds weird but at school, you know, like, you could walk through the corridors, and maybe ‘cos of the cliques, I didn’t have much confidence, but here I can actually walk down the corridor and walk round and just feel good about myself. [becomes tearful] Sorry! I’m starting to get emotional! It’s just, that’s such a great thing to go through, and so important, you know. Because then if you feel good about yourself, that definitely influences your academic performance. Erm.. and maybe it sounds silly, but you know, the odd sort of nickname you get, or the odd comment you get made, erm, like at school you’d get it all the time and you responded in a bit more of a…not aggressive, but a lot more defensive, erm, whereas I think here, you get comments made and you just, like, ignore it. And I think that is such a big part of growing up. People are always going to have their own views, and people should have their own views, and you shouldn’t take it personally if it’s different to yours, or if it offends you in any way. It’s all just, you know, lived up to what I expected, and been very positive. It’s good preparation in terms of university as I think I have got more friends and interact with people more than I did at school and I am more sociable. Despite living far, far away!

Motivations

Expectations not reflected here

Reality

Identity

Transition
Appendix 10 – Summary of the learner narratives

This appendix shows how the first five elements of the MERITS framework were used to conduct a thematic analysis of the twenty four learner narratives, before drawing the individual stories together under the sixth “Stories and Synthesis” element, as detailed in Chapter Five. Each narrative was transcribed in full (see Appendix 9), and then summarised in note form using a mixture of the students’ words and my own under the headings of Motivations, Expectations, Reality, Identity and Transition, although as all participants were discussing their experiences of the transition process, this was often implied across the whole interview rather than forming a separate category of its own. These were then colour coded to identify patterns across the data. My working notes are reproduced here without addition in order to show this aspect of the process. This snapshot also shows where I have identified the six key words analysed in Chapter 7, and begun to break these down into their different applications, and how I have recorded emerging narrative stories which were then worked into full composite profiles as detailed in Appendices 11 and 12. The linguistic and narrative patterns as seen here are not yet complete, with further ideas recorded manually as they emerged.

Student A - AS

M – good at exams as can deal with pressure, enjoys revision and enjoys learning new things. Wants to go to uni and then on to a job in ICT – most courses require A-Level Maths. Also would be first in family to go to uni and this will please his mum and dad. High intrinsic AND extrinsic.

E – difficult – requiring more time/effort/revision. Clue is in name – “more advanced” – requiring deeper understanding of contexts, more private studying and better organisational skills. Was looking forward to learning new things and “achieving”. Had very little idea about “the ideology of college” so came with open mind but was expecting more freedom to “do as he pleased”.

R – he misses school – feels “sad inside” he will never go to school again as he misses the people and enjoyed being in lesson 9-3. He thinks missing this lack of freedom “may seem a bit surprising” to me. He feels that his progress is now “down to me” and is adapting to a new lifestyle and his “next stage of life”.

I – feels he has matured as a person as he has become more independent and has adopted a more organised approach to private study. He has not made new friends though – feels the college is full of “established friendship groups” and so he remains friends just with the four best friends he has had since primary school – they are not in his lessons but he sees them on the bus after college. He does feel though that he is different from them as he is already doing better than them academically in college.

Student B - AS

M – unsure of future career path; A-Levels selected as best route to university through broader range of options. Parents preferred A-Levels – father said they would give her a “better chance”. motivations seem more intrinsic – see below.

E – harder than GCSEs because more independent study – not “spoon fed” as with GCSEs. Was looking forward to “getting better in languages” and trying new subjects not experienced at GCSE.
R – a great deal more independent study and further reading, as expected. Feels more “in charge of own work”.

I – still friends with people from school but has made new friends. Has become more independent and confident as a person – better at talking to new people – was shy before but small classes and being around new people means she talks more.

Student C - AS

M – only ever considered A-Levels as wants to go to uni to train as a teacher. Received no advice from school but knows others who had done A-Levels. Family assumed she would do A-Levels. Appears largely extrinsic.

E – thought they would be a lot harder than GCSEs and was worried she wouldn’t be able to handle the amount of work. Her brother had gone from getting As at GCSE to Us at A-Level. Was looking forward to more freedom than high school and more “free time” (defined as time away from the college itself), and to learning more about a wider range of topics.

R – She is finding A-Levels harder (more to remember) but had exaggerated her fears and is finding it “not quite as scary”. Had also exaggerated amount of free time – surprised by supervised study – though she’d be more independent. She does do more research on her own – not like school where all info was given by teachers.

I – feels “more determined” now – enjoys challenge of getting work done in own time. Has made a few new friends but only speaks with them in lesson – the people she socialises with outside of class are the same friends from school.

T – feels “quite comfortable”

Student D (AS)

M – Wants to go to uni to study Law and felt that “more qualifications” would lead there – the “more qualifications the better” rather than a BTEC which is “one little thing”. School careers advisor said A-Levels were “better” if you wanted unis to look at you; her mum and dad also wanted her to do A-Levels as they “never had the opportunity”. High extrinsic.

E – Thought that A-Levels would be “really overwhelming” and was worried she wouldn’t be able to keep on top of work – has friends already in college who found this at first. She expected to study a lot harder and prepare a lot more in advance for exams and to completing more work independently at home. Expected “more freedom” than school in being able to leave the building at dinner and that it would be hard to make new friends.

R – Much friendlier than expected – people aren’t shy in college. Feels has adapted well to workload, and that GCSEs prepared her well for A-Levels in the terminology she learned and skills she developed. Studies Independently a lot during the day and likes that she gets this library time during the week.

I – Feels has become “more mature” and organised in travelling independently, managing money, deadlines etc – no longer relies on others – “just me now”. Didn’t always meet deadlines at school but A-Levels are only two years and she wants to “move on in life”. Finds it odd calling teachers by their first name. Has kept one or two school friends but has drifted away from the others – has a new friendship group made up from her different classes and friends of friends.
Specifically mentioned (twice) how the transition from school to college had been made less overwhelming through the taster and induction days provided, and that the support of tutors had helped—“always there for you”.

**Student E (AS)**

M—Always knew he wanted to go to uni to do Sports Journalism—getting A Levels “the easiest way to do it”. Did look at apprenticeships for journalism but limited places and rather preferred he do A Levels as “he’s always been academic”. Appears largely extrinsic although expressed an intrinsic desire to study Media and History further.

E—Thought A Levels would be “harder” than GCSEs but that he would enjoy them more as studying subjects he’s chosen. Was looking forward to more freedom (going out at dinner, not wearing uniform) and independence (more study at home, developing research skills unlike at school where “just given a sheet to complete”).

R—Not many of his friends came to college but he has made new friends through lessons, friends of friends etc as well as staying in touch with old friends. Work has matched his expectations—more independent research and has done coursework on his own rather than told what to write as at school.

I—Feels he has changed “loads—too much”. He was “innocent” at school (eg student of the year three times for behaviour) but now feels the freedom means he misses lessons as he won’t get into trouble. BUT is more responsible and focused when working independently.

**Student F (AS)**

M—Originally looked at a BTEC in Drama in Yr 7/8 but became interested in Psychology and thought this career “more accessible” through A Levels, both in terms of getting to uni and developing the analytical skills needed—“knew for certain” by Yr 10/11. Intrinsic AND extrinsic.

E—Expected to be “more independent” in studying—teaching self some of the syllabus by reading and making own notes whereas at school you were “told it, write it down, you copy it”. Thought it would be “a lot of work”—essays, coursework, exams. Hoped to make new friends and lose the “cliques” popular at school but had got this impression from American teenage films/TV. Actively chose to go to a different college from people he knew from school.

R—College has “lived up to expectations”—diverse range of people with different backgrounds and experiences and has made lots of new friends which has given him a “sense of progression”. Has enjoyed getting involved with extra-curricular activities such as Student Action Group and is surprised by how much he has been encouraged to develop his own views.

I—Feels more mature and independent—has grown in confidence and “feels good” about himself. He has become more sociable and undergone “personal progression as well as academic”—he has more friends and interacts with people more than at school. “All part of growing up”. Became a little emotional here.

T—Completely positive.

**Student G (AS)**

M—“Really enjoyed learning and wanted to expand on that” - also liked the idea of university and “obviously you need A Levels for that”. She felt a BTEC “wasn’t suitable” for the Biology
degree she wanted to do; also teachers assumed A Levels were her "next expected step," as "you're a really bright girl" predicted As at GCSE. High intrinsic AND extrinsic.

E – Thought A Levels would be "a lot harder" with more independent work (eg getting info for herself – teachers warned in Yr 11 they "couldn't keep spoon feeding them now"). Worried she wouldn't get any help at all from teachers and expected to "get her head down from the beginning". College would be like school but with "no silly childish people".

R – A Level content not as hard as expected – but feels the "sheer volume" of material makes the qual hard rather than the actual concepts (eg the stress of remembering info in exams). Feels there is a division in college between A Level and vocational students – eg male students ("boys") play fighting in the Construction building – felt "like school".

I – Has "grown up and matured" – as well as learning a great deal has changed and developed as a person. Better skills in terms of organisation and revision techniques.

T – Wished she'd had more guidance about what subjects might be best for her next step – feels school didn’t tell her enough.

Student H (AS)

M – chose A-Levels to "keep options open" – had mixed grades at GCSE and no one thing she particularly loved – if she’d had a "standout subject" she’d have done a BTEC. Instead A-Levels allowed her to choose "a variety of subjects" – hopes to find one she loves and take it on to university.

E – Had done 14 GCSEs so thought having fewer subjects and exams would be easier. Was excited about her chosen subjects particularly as two were new – "a new area to go down". Was nervous but thought this "natural when starting something new".

R – The "jump" has been much bigger than expected. Has found it difficult balancing coursework and exams and lots of different deadlines.

I – Has developed more confidence and independence in college and become good at balancing all her commitments. Social life is not as good as high school as big friendship groups have been split up and she spends most of her free time studying in the library anyway. Feels more confident in her abilities and also in speaking to new people – easier to get along with people "because they love the same subject". Feels she has "grown up a bit more" and "matured".

T – Feels that high school didn’t give enough advice about the jump from GCSE to A-Level and didn’t prepare her for the work you have to do – "more knowledge would have helped".

Student I (AS- Resitting the year)

M – Looked at BTEC on open days but “didn’t seem the right option for university” which required more "academic subjects". A-Levels at college "seem like the first step to going to uni" – parents went to uni and suggested A-Levels as the "better option" and teachers recommended based on grades. Also not sure what subject she wanted to do at uni and A-Levels offered a range of subjects.

E – Expected a "massive jump" from GCSE – told at school A-Levels "much harder". Expectations of individual study set at interview whereas at school there was "a lot of spoonfeeding" and teachers would "do a lot for you". Expected more freedom – longer breaks etc.
R – “breezed through GCSEs” and thought could do same at college – didn’t really believe there would be as much independent work and thought that teachers would give as much help as at school. Also more independence to “do what you want!” – more laid back than expected and rather than revising and doing work she “took advantage” and “went for the social side of it a bit too much”.

I – “Was so naïve about it at first” – didn’t understand the importance of working hard – “wrong mentality” – didn’t take it seriously. Results were “a shock” – realised she needed to “step it up” and work harder or she wouldn’t get into uni.

T – Process “wasn’t explained that well” – weren’t told at school that certain A-Levels (and GCSEs) are needed for certain uni courses.

Student J (AS)

M – Has wanted to be a teacher since a young age and thought A-Levels “would open up a lot of opportunities to me”. Also felt it kept her options open if she changed her mind about teaching. “It just seemed like the right thing at the time” – “you do A-Levels after school”. Parents didn’t go to college.

E – Had friends in the year above and knew it would be “majorly different” – had heard how “hard” and “challenging” A-Levels were – a “kick up the bum” as would need to take information in for herself rather than being “spoonfed” info like at school. Didn’t enjoy school and thought college would be a “fresh start” – four classes in which to meet new people.

R – Easier in some ways (eg finds English Language easier than she’d thought as she’s interested and engaged) but more challenging in others – so many dates, theories etc to remember. Has met “lots of new people” – some she’s “not glad to have met”, but has enjoyed being able to express herself in college (eg by not wearing a uniform).

I – Has “majorly changed” whilst at college – openly says “this is me” – the college has given her the freedom to do so. Doesn’t mind what people think of her anymore and has a “mature attitude to things” when others are childish and unaccepting. Has “matured a lot” but feels that comes with age and experience rather than college.

T – Feels things are “going smoothly” and that she’s “on a track from school to college to uni” – feels it’s “preparing me constantly for everything”.

Student K (AS)

M – Originally wanted to go into the police and wanted A-Level Psychology so she could study Criminology. Boss said BTECs “weren’t as clever” and that she would be “wasted on them”. Didn’t see BTECs as the same level – “it sounds really bad” but she saw BTECs as “more a practical thing” and that A-Levels would “get her further”. Parents “pushed” her to Study A-Levels as they are “academic” and “more recognised as a qualification in the world”.

E – Has older cousins. Thought college would give more “freedom” and that “you’d get left to do as you want” – you’d just “get what you need and be left to learn what you want” – less “regimented” and more “relaxed” in terms of timetable etc.

R – Didn’t think “it would be as hard as it is”. At GCSE you can “not do anything and still come out with Bs and Cs” but has to do a lot more work now to even get the minimum – more detail needed for each mark and needs to revise every night.
I – Feels she’s changed “a bit” as you’re “given more responsibilities which forces you to grow up” – however in some ways “still feels like a child” as some teachers treat her that way. College allows you “to be your own sort of person – lets you embrace yourself and be the person you want to be” but you still get “the little girl drama” and it’s more serious than in school – eg arguments over boyfriends make her feel like she’s back in school sometimes. Has only kept one friend from high school and has made new friends through her classes or through friends of friends.

T – College “expect you to be a grown up as soon as you get here” whereas you feel “like a child as a high school student”. Wouldn’t change the college experience – complains a lot but enjoys it.

Student L (AS)

M – Wants to go to uni and then into teaching. Better “at writing work than practical” and also liked the opportunity to make new friends by being in different groups. Parents said A-Levels would be good – able to do it so I should.

E – Knew it would be “harder” from what her sister and teacher had said – a “lot more work” and “different” exams – was expecting “a big jump from GCSEs to A-Levels”. Was worried about social transition – in high school lots of people she’d known since primary but only one of them coming to college.

R – As expected – a lot “more material” to cover and “more in-depth”. At first it “was hard socially but you’re all new” – uncomfortable at first but soon “got normal”. Made new friends through her classes, SAG and by helping at open evenings.

I – Feels she has “more authority” outside of college – talked of a “hierarchy” and feeling “older and wiser” than school pupils. Feels she knows more than them as has had “more experience” and is on to the “next stage of life”. Also more confident as has had to get used to more people.

T – Feels she has handled the transition because she was “expecting the jump” and revised daily from the start.

Student 1 (F/T BTEC in Sport and Fitness)

M – Felt a BTEC was more practical – wanted to go into the sports industry and felt the “training” provided by a BTEC would be easier to apply in his future plans. “Nothing wrong with doing a BTEC” although he feels they are seen as “not as good”. Brother is two years older and had been advised to go the BTEC route if his sights were set on something specific. Saw A-Levels as theoretical and “academic” and therefore not the best route into sport – but he decided to take one as an additionality to “keep his options open”. High extrinsic.

E – High school only advised on A-Levels so expectations largely formed from the college prospectus and from friends a year older than him. Expected college to be “harder” and for the BTEC to carry a lot of coursework although he wasn’t worried about this as he knew he was good with deadlines. Thought college would be “more mature” – more freedom and more independent study. Expected his A-Level to be “more difficult” than his BTEC – more in-depth and more knowledge-based than training-based.
R – Is enjoying the educational side of college more than school as he is very passionate about his subjects and feels he learns a lot more. Spends free time during the day in the library as the BTEC has four or five assignments due at any one time.

I/T – Spoke of college as the next step in “becoming a professional” and “thinking about the future”. Sees himself as more mature and believes the hands-on, practical nature of the BTEC has acted like work experience in specifically preparing him for working life (unlike A-Levels). He believes around 95% of his year group (including himself) will be going on to university. However, also described his BTEC class as “almost like primary” because the timetable is restrictive and the group “keeps to itself” – unlike in A-Level classes, where “everyone knows everyone” and a more mixed community of friendship groups is created. (BTEC as insular?)

Student 2 (F/T BTEC in Sport and Fitness)

M – Did PE GCSE at school as had “always been sporty and active” but would have preferred to do a Level 2 BTEC. Given individual advice by a teacher – wants to be a basketball player and chose BTEC as it focuses on the “practical side”. Also advised by uncle to do something he liked and could see himself doing in future. Wants to do sports science at university with a view to teaching if basketball doesn’t work out and feels the topics covered in the BTEC will prepare him for this. Intrinsic and extrinsic.

E – Expected coursework rather than exams and lots of practical work alongside research activities. New topics covered in more detail at a “higher standard”.

R – Has been surprised at the actual variety of the material covered. Has found teaching to be highly individualised and personalised – teachers are “more to our level – find the best way to teach us”. Thinks the breaks are too long for students like him who are generally up-to-date with their work. College is “very friendly”.

I – VERY positive here. Feels a lot of things have changed about him, such as “my social skills have developed” and is very proud to have been elected course rep – “a really good achievement”. Has developed “good skills” such as IT and typing skills that he recognises will be useful at uni and at work. Some of his high school friends came here but have different breaks – sees this as both a downside and a good thing as he has developed more confidence being “forced to meet new people”. Still sees school friends after college.

T – Has been voted Chair of a group the students have set up themselves which aims to get school pupils in to college on visits to aid the transition process – he himself would have liked something like this.

Student 3 (F/T BTEC in ICT)

M – Was always interested in IT but didn’t get the quals for A-Levels and wanted to “work his way up”. Liked idea of coursework rather than exams and doing work at home. May go to uni although wants to work for a year first.

E – Wasn’t sure although people came in from another college and said it was different from school and that he would miss it.

R – Thought the BTEC would be “general” IT – wasn’t expecting to be able to choose a pathway but this “opens the door wider” for going into an organisation with more skills. Hated school (where he was bullied) but has “loved every minute” of college. More relaxed – tutors “have a laugh but if you go off track they put you back on course”. Doesn’t want to leave but it’s “part of life”.

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I – Has made new friends at college through ice breaker activities and working together in class as well as Student Action Group. Was very quiet and lacked confidence but now “never shuts up”. Has enjoyed extra responsibilities (eg peer mentoring, leading lesson activities) and no longer feels nervous of “going into the big world”.

**Student 4 (F/T BTEC in ICT)**

M – Knew he wanted to study ICT but discounted A-Levels as couldn’t think of three more subjects he wanted to do – “hard enough to choose GCSE options”. Liked the structure of the BTEC – the clearcut achievement boundaries (Pass/Merit/Distinction) and doesn’t like exams or revision – prefers continuous assessment. Wants to study ICT at uni and feels the BTEC will give him a more “in-depth knowledge” of this subject – better preparation than A-Levels. Did well in ICT at GCSE and wanted “more detail” as it was “the best for me” and “a good pathway”.

E – Was quite worried about what he’d do with the gaps between scheduled lessons and how he’d use this new freedom. Came from a small school and knew college was a much bigger environment where he’d need to make new friends.

R – He has enjoyed the additional responsibilities that college brings – “not just about learning”. He has involved himself in the “social side” of college and made new friends through Student Action Group, but does notice that a lot of students walk around or sit on their own.

I – Has more confidence now thanks to speaking in front of large groups and the college board as part of SAG – recognises this is “a big thing”. Others are surprised at his maturity and how much he’s already achieved at college – he has also surprised himself as “would never have seen this in a crystal ball” when he was at school.

T – College has been a “huge change” and the step from college to university will be even bigger – current pathway like “going up some huge steps”.

**Student 5 (F/T BTEC in ICT)**

M – Initially did A-Levels for 2 weeks but felt teachers were giving him “too much work” – switched to BTEC as felt it would be “more focused” and cut down on workload. Family and school had encouraged him to do A-Levels as he did well at school and A-Levels followed by uni was the “set standard”. Had wanted to do computing since year 9 as we are “part of a developing world” – unsure whether he will then move on to apprenticeship, job or uni.

E – Expected fewer exams and less revision – doesn’t like exams – prefers to get coursework “done there and then rather than stuffing just before an exam” as this “allows you to prove your knowledge”.

R – The 24 units of the BTEC are very focused but also allow some choice. His BTEC group “clicked” and although he still has friends from primary and secondary “the three groups don’t mix”. Hasn’t stayed friends with any of the people he met in his A-Level classes. He has “more free time” than expected – “time to chill out with friends” – and although he is very focused in the classroom and doesn’t “mess about anymore” there is not much work outside.

I – Has changed “socially” – more open and feels others have accepted him for who he is. Was “quite closed” in secondary school has “clicked” in college just by being who he is rather than having to change his personality.

T – Has a long term girlfriend in Canada and sees his BTEC as part of “preparing for the future” and for employment.
Student 6 (F/T BTEC in ICT)

M – Initially did A-Levels at another college but failed his first year. Chose these as he felt four subjects would “mix it up a bit” – worried one subject would get boring. Also his family thought it “would be best” for him to do A Levels. However found them progressively difficult and that there was no support for his ADHD and Tourette’s. Changed to BTEC as it covers everything he’s interested in and what he wants to do in the future. Wants to go to uni, maybe in America.

E – No exams – A-Levels are linear and you “regurgitate” at the end of the year – he prefers the idea of BTEC being “constant”. A BTEC had helped an older friend into a job so he was expecting “a hands-on, practical style of learning” as opposed to the “more theoretical” A-Level, where “they teach you to pass an exam”. Expected college to be “a place of higher learning” where he would be treated like an adult.

R – BTEC and college have been “everything he expected”. Treated as an adult – there is support but he is still treated like an individual.

I – Thinks he’s “grown” – still messes about as he is “very active and sociable” but he has “matured a lot” both socially and academically. Concentrates a lot better in class and “no longer blames” his learning difficulties. Many of his old friends are still at his last college which was “a bit of a blow” but he has “a new friendship group” from his BTEC class.

T – Feels college has given him a “second chance”.

Student 7 (F/T BTEC in ICT)

M – BTEC “seemed a bit easier than A-Levels” – one subject is equivalent to 3 A-Levels and he prefers coursework to exams. Family said it was “his choice” – he likes computers and using them to research which “you can’t do in exams” and also thinks everything in the future will be run by computer. Will go straight into work as uni too expensive and “too much of a hassle”.

E – Thought college would be “better than high school” with more freedom – eg chance to go out at dinner. Expected to have to make new friends – slight “social anxiety – a nervousness of meeting new people” but already had friends in college and was “excited” at the thought of managing his own workload – “the satisfaction of doing the work and earning that time off” so he can have a lie-in.

R – Peers are “much better” than in high school – “they include me – I don’t have to do much to be included”. Still in touch with a few friends from school although “some of my closest friends are from the BTEC”. Is enjoying the course as “gets to sit in a comfy chair and be on a computer all day”.

I – He has “changed a lot” – now smokes and goes out more whereas before he “barely did anything social”. Has become “more aware of my grades and what they can actually do in future life”.

T – “GCSEs are harder than BTEC” due to the exam structure – “here you are just given assignments to do” and he can see what level he’s working at.
Student 8 (F/T BTEC in ICT)

M – Originally “tried A-Levels” at another college and failed the year – found it “the same as school – just repeating yourself”. First choice had been a BTEC in Graphic Design but mum wanted her to do A-Levels as it gives a “wider option” of what to do later and thought she “might as well try” them – but then didn’t like having to do four as was only really interested in Graphics and Computing. Not sure about uni.

E – Not sure what to expect from the “new environment” but has friends already in college and thought it would be “more relaxed and less strict”. Expected the college to be “welcoming” and thought the BTEC would be “more enjoyable” as it’s a subject she’s interested in.

R – How she thought it would be.

I – Can’t see any great change in herself but “people say I’m happier and more relaxed”. Has “definitely started to work harder” and “doesn’t just give up” – a combination of a “different atmosphere” and doing something she wants to do. Still friends with people from previous A-Level classes but new friends are from her BTEC group.

Student 9 (F/T BTEC in ICT)

M – “Had nowhere else to go”. Did a year of A-Levels at another college and failed as he “messed about” – chose these as it “seemed like carrying on from high school” with exams etc – BTECs seemed “a bit of a cop-out” as they are completely coursework and people think they are easier and not an equivalent. Mum and dad wanted him to do A-Levels as “BTECs didn’t seem as good” – “what’s the point in going to college if you don’t do A-Levels”. Current college gave him “another chance” but the only courses with spaces were BTECs in ICT or Childcare – hadn’t done computing since year 9.

E – Thought work would be “steady throughout the year” unlike A-Levels which “pile on the work” near the end while BTEC is “middle of the road all the way through”.

R – More work than he thought. “College is a lot different” as you get to know your teachers – helps him learn as it’s “not just a teacher at the front of the class, which is good”.

I – Has changed “a lot!” – wasn’t interested before and “didn’t care” but has gone from “being a beginner” to really enjoying the subject. Still sees his friends from A-Level but is now closer to the people in his BTEC group as he spends a full week with them and has “really got to know them”.

T – If his second year goes well he wants to do ICT at uni – hasn’t looked at jobs yet as wasn’t sure he’d complete the course and so hadn’t really considered the future until now.
Student 10 (F/T BTEC in Childcare and Education)

M – Always wanted to work with children but “didn’t feel ready for a job” yet and thought A-Levels “looked too hard” as she doesn’t like “tests” and feels she is better at coursework. Felt she would be “growing up too quick if I got a job” but eventually wants to work as a nursery nurse. Not going to uni – doesn’t “like anything about it”.

E – Thought there would be “lots of work” but that it “would be a lot easier” than it actually is.

R – Has “double the work at school…constantly have loads to do”. Didn’t expect to study two units at a time and up to ten essays at once.

I – After “being very good at school” she “went weird” due to the stresses of college – “went dead bad…very loud, attitude…in your face”. This was due to the “really big change” but now feels “more mature…more grown up and responsible for myself”. Feels “much more confident” and has made “lots of new friends” from across college, including A-Level students – friends from school or friends of friends but also met when waiting around – “I just talk to anyone”.

T – Didn’t keep on top of work at first but eventually learned to cope as she “likes change”.

Student 11 (F/T BTEC in Childcare and Education)

M – “Didn’t want to do exams anymore” and has wanted to work with children for the last 7 years as she looks after the “little ones” in the family. May go to uni or straight into a job after college as “not good at doing tests”.

E – Was “scared” and nervous at the thought of so many new people – “so many other courses going on at the same time you just don’t know who you’re going to meet”. Has a friend who’d done the course before and knew it would be “tough” as the course is at “the highest level” and she’d “have to put the work in”.

R – Not as hard as expected – the workload is “only hard if you don’t keep on top of it”.

I – Has got “more confident” in talking to new people but at the beginning was a “nightmare to tutors” and “could be rude” – was “hanging around with the wrong people” (friends from school). “Looking back this wasn’t very good” but has changed her attitude and is “glad she’s changed” – she’s “made new friends with her voc group” and it’s all thanks to them.

T – “I like to think I’ve grown up a bit since high school”. Ice breaker activity at first session was “helpful” as it made her talk to new people.

Student 12 (F/T BTEC in Childcare and Education)

M – Interested in working with children but otherwise no clear idea of future. Has applied for apprenticeship but if she doesn’t get it she will complete her second year at college. Might go to uni but “not 100%”.

E – Had already done a level 2 in same subject so was expecting to “learn the same things in more detail” and “a lot harder…going into depth a bit more”. Also expected “more freedom to do what you want…not having to stay in for dinner” and being treated “like an adult rather than a child”.
R – Better than she thought. Hadn’t expected so many assignments on the go at once but it’s “not all work work work” – emphasis on activities that will benefit them in the workplace – preparing them for a job. Has loved the structure of being on placement every other week. Treated more like an adult – “they phone you about absences rather than your parents…makes you feel like you’ve got more responsibilities”.

I – Feels “more confident” in talking to new people and working with new children – new friendship group of the girls on her course, not school friends. “More organised and more prepared” – gets things done straightaway.

T – Feels prepared…ready to leave college if the apprenticeship comes through.

Keyword analysis:

Freedom
- Physical freedom
- Freedom to manage own time and work
- Freedom to “be yourself” (student J, K)
- Freedom from rules and responsibilities
- Freedom to make mistakes

Practical
Independent/Independence
Harder/more difficult
More mature/grown up
Confidence

Emerging Narratives
“The Fresh Start” (student F, J, 3, 6, 8, 9)
“The Practical One” (student 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12)
“The Subject Specialist” (student 4, F)
“The Love of Learning” (student A, G)
“The Get Me Where I Need to Go”
“The Make My Family Proud” (student A)
“The Not Sure about the Future” (student H)
“The Second Chance” (student 6, 8, 9)
Appendix 11: Worked example of Composite Learner Profile

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 7, the composite learner profiles presented in this study are fictional only in the sense that each one is drawn from more than one of the individual narratives. Each composite has been directly formed from the data collected during these narratives, a process outlined here through discussion of how one of these profiles – The Second Chance reproduced below – was created. This profile has been chosen for representative purposes only as all profiles were written using the same process.

“The Second Chance”

Something, somewhere, has not gone to plan for this learner. Often, an academic choice has been made that proved to be erroneous – a pathway selected that did not, in the end, match the needs and abilities of the learner, or a choice of educational provider where the learner failed to settle and integrate. They may have dropped out of this course partway through, or remained to the end and failed to achieve the required standard; either way, the course they have chosen now represents another chance. Likely to be a year older than most of their classmates, this learner approaches their new studies with a maturity won from experience and a confidence drawn from knowing they are lucky enough to be on the correct path now.

The main method for writing each profile was the use of the thematic analysis conducted under the MERITS model framework. Having transcribed each interview, I organised each narrative under sectional headings: Motivations, Expectations, Reality, Identity and Transition. The structure of the interview schedule meant that this did not necessitate reordering any of the stories, but simply served as a method of clearly identifying which section particular comments related to. Once I had transcribed each of the 24 interviews in this way, I colour coded recurrent ideas in the narratives as seen in Appendix 10; for example, when asked about their motivations for choosing their course, a number of the learners said they had originally chosen a different course and/or a different educational provider but that it had not proved to be the right choice – such comments were all highlighted in the same colour across the narratives and, as can be seen, incorporated into
an appropriate composite. Where possible, I have used the learners' own words in shaping these into cohesive narratives; for example, Student 9 commented that the BTEC he had enrolled for at NCFE had given him "another chance", which I have adapted slightly to provide the name of this particular composite. These profiles were then discussed by teaching staff within the setting during a focus group (see Appendix 16), where it was agreed that no changes were needed to either the range or the wording of the profiles.
Appendix 12: Composite Learner Profiles

“The Fresh Start”

The Fresh Start has not particularly enjoyed their previous experiences of education. This could be for a number of reasons, either academic or social, but regardless of specifics, this student views college as an opportunity to become someone new, forging a fresh identity outside of the familiar environment of secondary school. Familiarity for this learner is not a positive – they have operated in the school environment for five years, and whilst they themselves have matured and changed, the way they are perceived by others has not. Now old and unsatisfactory friendship groups can be left behind and new ones formed, meaning Fresh Starts are free to be themselves. Thus academic choices, whilst important, come second to the social benefits conferred by college.

“The Practical One”

The Practical One has successfully completed their secondary school education and achieved satisfactory GCSE grades which allow them to progress to level three study. However, the school system of assessment through summative examination has not been enjoyable for this student, and although hard work has ensured some measure of achievement, this regime does not play to their strengths. The Practical One prefers projects and coursework, and feels they will thrive in an educational environment where work is assessed continuously and where they will be responsible for managing their own time and workload. For many of these individuals, the skills and abilities being assessed are also perceived as likely to be valuable in the world of work. This student is not worried about the academic transition to level three; in fact, they feel their new course is likely be less of a challenge than all the examinations required at GCSE.

“The Subject Specialist”

The Subject Specialist already knows what they are interested in, and sees college as an opportunity to study this subject, or group of subjects, in more detail. The school timetable, packed with a range of lessons reflecting the number of subjects studied at GCSE, was more to be endured than celebrated for its variety, and this student is looking forward to ditching topics of less interest in order to focus on those that matter. This might be in the form of a single subject studied for a BTEC or a cluster of related subjects pursued at A-Level; either way, this student thinks that the chance to select a single, elective pathway reflects their interests and therefore their identity as an individual, and that college classes will be populated with similarly like-minded people.

“The Love of Learning”

For this student, intrinsic motivation is key. Here, the qualification itself is secondary to the knowledge it can provide – this student has a deep desire to study at a deeper level than the schooling system has been able to offer, and develop their academic skills in preparation for a life of learning and cognitive development. School offered some opportunity to learn, but the presence of other students with less desire and focus provided a distraction – an annoyance to be tolerated in large classes where some patently did not want to be there. College will offer a new, more mature environment where students have chosen to attend because they wish to be there, and this atmosphere of academia is one to be looked forward to, even if this student does occasionally worry that the work will be challenging.
'The Get Me Where I Need to Go'

For this learner, level three study in itself is not necessarily an attraction, although there may be elements of the course that hold some appeal. Instead, the qualification chosen by this student is simply a means to an end. It may be a stepping stone to studying a particular subject at university but is more often seen as a necessity for this learner’s chosen career, perceived as essential or at least highly desirable in connection with this goal. This perception may have come from a variety of sources – friends, family, teachers, the media, university entry requirements – but is deeply engrained and nearly always external. They are going to college because they have been told it is the best thing to do, either because of the status it confers or the qualification to which it leads.

"The Make My Family Proud"

This learner values their family, and in turn values what their family hold dear. Their parents may well not have studied at level three and certainly didn’t get the chance to go to university; this student can now put this right by thriving in education and gaining academic success. This success will be demonstrated by going to college and doing well enough to gain entry to Higher Education, where a good degree will lead to higher status and – presumably – a well-paying career. This learner is happy to follow this path – they want to make their parents proud and, after all, if their parents aspire to such vicarious academic status then it must be worth having.

"The Not Sure about the Future"

This learner has yet to find a clear pathway in life, despite the advice imparted by family, teachers and peers. Most do, however, perceive that continuing with their education in some form is likely to be of value in the future, regardless of what this might hold – although some are just buying some time to think about their options. This student is more likely to pick a subject or subjects they enjoy rather than those leading towards a particular career – they want to keep their options open rather than entering a potentially narrow pathway. There may be high extrinsic motivators for this student in the form of their parents, who have made it clear that if they don’t do something useful (like go to college) while they are pondering their future, they can get a job or get out.

"The Second Chance"

Something, somewhere, has not gone to plan for this learner. Often, an academic choice has been made that proved to be erroneous – a pathway selected that did not, in the end, match the needs and abilities of the learner, or a choice of educational provider where the learner failed to settle and integrate. They may have dropped out of this course partway through, or remained to the end and failed to achieve the required standard; either way, the course they have chosen now represents another chance. Likely to be a year older than most of their classmates, this learner approaches their new studies with a maturity won from experience and a confidence drawn from knowing they are lucky enough to be on the correct path now.
Appendix 13: Recruitment email sent to all teaching staff at Northlands College

Dear All

I am looking for six volunteers to take part in a short focus group as part of my ongoing doctoral research at Manchester University. Participants need to teach either A-Level or BTEC at level three, and I would be particularly interested to hear from anyone who teaches or who has taught on both programmes (although please don’t consider this essential – I am looking for a range of participants).

The focus group will take place next month during normal working hours, and will last a maximum of one hour. During the focus group you will be asked to discuss a number of composite student profiles which I will send to you in advance of the session. This represents the final stage of my research into the impact of academic transition upon learner identities, and your feedback during the focus group would be greatly valued.

If you would be interested in taking part, please contact (name and contact details removed) and she will send you full details of the study.

Kind regards

Liz Gregory
Appendix 14: Information Sheet for Focus Group Participants

Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a study as part of a student project – I am currently undertaking a doctoral qualification at Manchester University, looking at the impact of academic transition and educational choices upon learner identity. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the study?

Elizabeth Gregory, The Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

Title of the study

“A Study of Learners' Self-Perception in the FE Environment: the impact of post-16 choices upon learner identity during academic transition, and how this affects the ways in which learners narrate their own educational experiences”.

What is the aim of the study?

My aim is to investigate student identity issues within two different learner cohorts (A-Level and BTEC students) in terms of how they narrate their academic choices, their experiences of the academic transition from level two to level three and from school to college, and the impact (if any) this process of transition has had upon their identity. Specifically I am interested in whether there is a sense of a shared identity in how learners understand their sense of themselves as students following different programmes of study. 24 individual interviews have been completed with A-Level and BTEC students and 8 composite learner profiles drawn up as a result of a thematic and linguistic analysis of the data collected.

Why have I been chosen?

You have contacted (name removed) to request further information about the study after receiving an initial email sent to all teaching staff in college. She has selected six members of staff to take part in the focus group.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?
You would be asked to take part in a small focus group with five other members of staff. Prior to this you will be sent the composite learner profiles which have been created from the data collected during interviews with students, in order to illustrate the different positions within the narratives. It is important you do not discuss these with anyone before the focus group takes place and that you respect the confidential nature of the data at this stage. You will then be asked to discuss these composite profiles as part of the focus group.

What happens to the data collected?

The focus group discussion will be recorded and transcribed. Anonymous quotes from the data will be used in a chapter of my thesis discussing the validity of the composite learner profiles.

How is confidentiality maintained?

Your names will be replaced with an alternative identifier in order to break the link between data and individuals who can be personally identified. These identifiers will be kept in a locked desk drawer at my private residence. Electronic data will be stored on a securely encrypted memory key, and audio recordings will be deleted once the interviews have been fully transcribed. Direct quotations reproduced in the final report will be used anonymously, using only the identifier rather than actual names.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

Participation is entirely voluntary - it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Will I be paid for participating in the study?

There is no financial or other incentive for taking part in the study.

What is the duration of the study?

You will be asked to take part in one focus group with five other members of staff, conducted by myself, that will last a maximum of one hour.

Where will the study be conducted?

The focus group will take place within a classroom at college at a time convenient to all participants and will not require you to travel to any other location.

Will the outcomes of the study be published?

The data collected from the focus group will be included within my university thesis as well as possibly in other publications, but results will be presented anonymously so that neither the college nor any of the study participants could be identified.

Criminal Records Check

As a qualified teacher, I have undergone a satisfactory criminal records check that enables me to work with young people.
Contact for further information

If you would like to contact me for advice about the research project, please email me at [email address anonymised] or telephone me on [number anonymised]

What if something goes wrong?

You are welcome to approach me for help or advice at any stage of the procedure, either before or after the interview.

If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093
Appendix 15: Consent form for focus group participants

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

5. I confirm that I have read the information sheet provided when I first expressed my interest in the study, and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

6. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

7. I understand that the focus group discussion will be audio-recorded

8. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
5. I agree that any data collected may be passed to other researchers

6. I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals.

I agree to take part in the above project

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Appendix 16 – Partial Transcription of Staff Focus Group, showing use of MERITS framework and links to composite profiles

This extract is taken from twenty-six minutes into the hour-long discussion, and has been highlighted to show how the composite learner profiles link to the MERITS framework. Here, the group are discussing the Second Chance composite profile, but the discussion broadens to include various motivations for choosing a particular pathway (highlighted in yellow), expectations of the college environment (turquoise) and the potential offered by the transition process to make both positive and negative changes to identity (pink). This section of the transcript emphasises the importance of learners making informed choices, and is interesting in its implication that students who don’t have a clear understanding of their motivations may develop a more negative learner identity than those who do.

T1: The Second Chance learner is the least positive of all the groups here. They have no intention of showing interest in front of the group – they are often cocky and deeply unhappy. But if you can turn them around then it’s very rewarding.

T3: A lot of those who will become Second Chances have little engagement at the beginning [of their original choice of course] – they’ve been told they have to do something, or have picked a fourth option [A-Level students at NCFE have to study an additional fourth subject in their first year], or couldn’t get on to A-Level.

T5: The majority of A-Level students don’t know what they want to do. They can become negative or disruptive.

T4: Because they’re here for the social life?

T1: They can gravitate towards the wrong groups.

T4: One girl was a nightmare at school [where T4 had been teaching prior to starting at NCFE] – she was disruptive and took others with her. I saw her in college and there was not a single negative comment about this student. She was a real success story.
Appendix 17 – Partial Transcription of Staff Focus Group, showing use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools

This extract is taken from ten minutes into the hour-long discussion, and has been highlighted to show use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools. Only those tools relevant to this section of the conversation – disposition, habitus and structure - have been discussed, as an example of how the tools were used throughout the focus group. Issues highlighted in the learner narratives were considered in the same way as exemplified here. The pink indicates an interesting question that highlights a key interest of the LITP – whether students on different academic pathways inherently possess different dispositions, or whether differences are created through college structures such as timetabling and tutor allocation. The remainder of this transcript suggests a combination of the two factors may be at work, with the yellow sections indicating the impact of college structures and the turquoise highlighting ways in which students on different pathways may be revealing a particular habitus through their practice.

T1: Vocational has the advantage that you can see them outside of lesson – A-Levels feel a bit cheated as vocational gives more support.
T5: *Is there more support at BTEC because they need it, or because there’s no time at A-Level? You say that voc is “like family”, but A-Level isn’t.*
T2: *Yes, it’s to do with how the timetable is structured – you see them all the time.*
T1: They trust us more. BTEC tutors put huge amounts into their students and there is a sense that they will come to you. I’m always surprised by how diverse A-Level students are – voc have their mates.
T4: They become very strong friends.
T1: A-Level students are more isolated. I assume they know each other but they don’t.
T2: *They go from class to class – my daughter [studying A-Levels at another college] struggles to connect.*
T1: It’s often Christmas before A-Level students trust each other, or us.
T3: BTEC students are all shouting over each other whilst the A-Level students are more quiet, especially for the first half term.
T5: *They have different styles of learning – BTEC students are less reflective than A-Level students due to the practical nature of the course.*
T3: BTEC are more vocal – their style is to get involved – there is an element of different styles of learning.
T1: BTEC are reflective, but in a different way – they reflect during rather than afterwards and it’s not always verbal or written. It’s inferred in the work.
T2: They are reflecting, just not after the event in the more traditional academic way.