Mature Women Students and Higher Education:

Do their skills count?

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Abstract

This thesis examines the experience of a group of mature women students before, during and after their period of study in higher education. Specific research areas of investigation focus on their existing skills, and the value they give to these skills, and those they develop over their time of study.

The context for the study is provided by an examination of the historical development of girls' and women's education, looking specifically at its gendered nature. Similarly, the development of universities is examined, in particular, debates on what universities are for, and how they are increasingly linked to providing an educated and skilled workforce rather than being autonomous institutions of education.

The research is situated in a period of keen interest in skills development, when many universities were considering their development in some form or other. This sets the context for the women participants in this study in schools that were piloting key skills in different ways. This is explored in relation to their experience of this burgeoning interest in skills.

The research approach used was chosen to enhance understanding of the issues that affect mature women students returning to learning. It draws heavily on feminist methodology and is also influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and Paolo Freire. These theorists are used to shed light on how issues of power are endemic within the society in which this research takes place. The feminist methodology employed has allowed me to become part of the research, and to reflect upon my own experiences as a mature student in higher education as well as those of the other participants.

The research analysis is based heavily upon multiple semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the women. The analysis reveals how the women feel their skills are valued both by themselves and by the institute of higher education where they studied and by wider society. Whilst the women feel that they have considerable skills as mature women, the discussion reveals a number of interesting factors regarding which skills the women expect to be valued in the wider world compared to the skills they value in themselves.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0: Background

Since the early 1990s, the expansion of higher education in the United Kingdom in terms of the growth of the numbers of institutions and the widening variety of courses has opened up opportunities for many more diverse populations to benefit from being educated to a higher level. This growth and the implications of it for society in general, have attracted a significant amount of attention from researchers in the area of education, and policy makers in government because of the impact on the workforce and the possible changing nature of higher education itself. Significantly, the Dearing Report (1997), *Higher education in the learning society* starts with the recommendations that:

> *Over the next 20 years, the United Kingdom must create a society committed to learning throughout life. That commitment will be required from individuals, the state, employers and providers of education and training. Education is life enriching and desirable in its own right. It is fundamental to the achievement of an improved quality of life in the UK* (Summary Report, p1).

The Report was the largest review of higher education in the UK since the Robbins Report in the early 1960s. The main thrust concerned funding for universities, but it also called for a further expansion of student numbers, 'young and mature, full-time and part-time' (1997, p1). Student numbers were already on the increase, having expanded greatly since the

1960s. The abolition of the polytechnics and the embracing of these institutions into the university sector in 1992 also added to the number of higher education institutions.

Crucially, the Dearing Report highlighted the concept of 'lifelong learning', which refers to situations where people return to learning at any time in their lives or to learn part-time after the end of their compulsory education. Learning for adults had often traditionally been seen mainly as a leisure activity provided by extra mural departments of universities, the traditional 'night class'. Now, the focus was on raising the educational attainment of the workforce, with higher education taking a leading role, along with government, employers and society in general. So, although the report overtly stated that higher education was a good thing in its own right, the real motive for increasing the numbers of graduates was more concerned with the economic viability of the workforce rather than education for its own sake. A better educated workforce, both women and men, would improve productivity as well as competitiveness with other nations. However, the role of women in the workforce has been an issue of concern because of their different experiences of education and the workplace, and the need for many to retrain to fit the new challenges of employment (Brine, 1999).

1.1: Women in Education

It is well documented that girls and boys receive different schooling, and there has been much research looking at the different nature of the education girls receive (Deem, 1987; Delamont, 1996; Spender, 1982). Historically, girls have

been educated for their future role as mothers and homemakers, with the emphasis on nurturing and caring (Oakley, 1974). With the advent of comprehensive education in the 1960s, the situation began to change for girls and there were more opportunities to access other less traditional subjects, and to go on to higher education (Weinreich-Haste, 1984). However, many continued to choose typical female occupations, and often gave up their jobs when they married and started their families, perhaps returning to work part-time once their children were of school age.

The context in which this research is set is the experience of mature women students in higher education in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is important to realise that most of the women interviewed as part of this study will have had their school education in the 1960s and 1970s, and experienced the gendered education outlined above. It is questionable whether the type of skills fostered and developed therein are sufficient to equip them to return to the modern day workforce.

1.2: Skills

Higher education in the United Kingdom has historically been more academically oriented than technical compared with, for example, Germany in the nineteenth century. Although Britain led the Industrial Revolution, manufacturing had not been the main focus of economic activity; rather it was trade upon which the economy was built. Since the latter part of the twentieth century, globalisation has changed the way the world operates and Britain saw the need to have a much more reactive and skilled workforce that could adapt to

changing trends in employment. With huge advances in transport systems and technology, large companies were able to import cheap labour or move their plant to other areas to take advantage of the cheap labour there. Newly developing countries were industrialising at fast rates and competition was rife to accommodate western businesses, particularly in the service industries. For example, companies such as banks and railways outsourced their enquiries to call centres in India (Mallia, 1997). The nature of employment was thus changing and required employees with different skills in order to compete globally.

There have been a number of initiatives introduced to raise awareness of the need for certain skills, and a number of attempts to answer the perceived shortage. The most prominent of these initiatives was the introduction of a qualification called Key Skills. The concept of delivering certain core skills was not new, but the Key Skills Qualification was arguably the one with the highest profile (QCA, 1999). This qualification was seen as a response to many employers who had stated that graduates in particular, did not possess the skills that employers needed, such as, for example, good communication skills and the ability to work in teams (Ledbury & Matheson, 1998; Raggatt, Edwards & Small, 1996).

Lord Dearing who, in his review of higher education (1997) referred to at the beginning of this chapter, emphasised the need to develop skills and apply them in context, recommended that institutions of higher education should prioritise the development of teaching and learning strategies aimed at incorporating skills deemed necessary to enhance

the 'graduateness' of students and prepare them for the world of work.

1.3: Mature women in higher education

Whilst government policy was aimed at increasing the number of school leavers entering higher education during the 1990s, at the same time, it was being recognised that there was a pool of labour which was not being utilised to the optimum extent and thus moves were made to encourage mature women back into the labour market (Bourne, 1996; Wallis & Mallia, 1996; Kennedy, 1997).

Many women who had originally worked in offices, for example, sought to refresh their Information Technology (IT) skills at further education colleges (Wallis & Mallia, 1996). Once there, they were often encouraged to raise their aspirations through access courses leading to higher education. These courses, whilst preparing students with no formal qualifications for higher education were also successful in raising self esteem and self worth. They provided a supportive atmosphere and a timetable that fitted around the school day which supported women with child care commitments in particular (McGivney, 1990; Davies & Parry, 1993; Hayes, King & Richardson, 1997).

Thus increasing numbers of mature women began to access higher education, and became a significant group for research as their needs and experiences were different to those traditionally associated with students entering higher education.

1.4: Lack of research in this area

There have been a number of studies of the experience of mature students in higher education (Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003; Harris & Brooks, 1998; Hopper & Osbourne, 1975; Lea & West, 1995), but few concentrating on mature women only and the issues that they themselves feel are important (Pascall, & Cox, 1993a; Tittle & Denker, 1980). Much of this previous work concentrated on access issues and the problems encountered therein, such as financial difficulties, childcare arrangements and the effect of higher education on personal relationships. There were also a number of studies on access courses (Williams, 1997; Davies & Parry, 1993).

This study is different because it concentrates on mature women students in higher education and their skills; the skills they bring with them to university life and the skills they develop whilst there. In particular, the study examines how these skills are valued, both by the women and their institution and how the wider world views these skills. There are numerous studies on skills, linked particularly to the economic needs of the workforce in general (Assiter, 1995; Green, 1997; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Macintosh, 1998), but few include specific references to mature women in higher education.

This thesis is also different in that it is based upon a longitudinal study. There is a lack of this type of study covering the development of skills over time for a particular group of students. The thesis is based upon the experience of mature women before, during and after their period of study

in higher education and captures the changes over time of their skills development and it also examines their own perceptions of these skills.

Having identified a gap in the existing knowledge, the purpose of this study is to investigate the aforementioned issues carrying out in-depth interviews with women who were either embarking upon a university education for the first time, or who were returning to full time postgraduate study to train as secondary school teachers, having completed their first degree some years previously.

In order to situate my research in the field, it is necessary to discuss the debate on skills, which was current at the time, and how mature women fit into this discussion.

1.5: The skills debate – where women fit into this

The Sex Discrimination Act (1975), and its subsequent amendments, was mainly aimed at practices in the workplace, but the act also established the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) to eliminate discrimination and promote equality between women and men. By 2004, the Bill was subsumed into the Equality Bill (2004) which had a broader remit and where gender became just one of six strands of discrimination. Within this act, the EOC was renamed the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. Similarly the office of Minister for Women, established in 1997 was changed to Minister for Women and Equality in 2007, the latter title appearing rather oxymoronic.

Whilst this legislation deals with issues of gender discrimination, it does not necessarily address the root of discrimination, or the society in which the inequality flourishes. By this I mean that by taking the male as the norm, female is seen as 'other'. Giving women equality of access is not necessarily making everything else equal, due to the apparent subordinate nature of women within society, often manifested in taken for granted assumptions about the role of men and women in the society in which we live. Until the 1960s feminist movements gave women a voice, many women were aware of their subordinate role but did not necessarily have the discourse with which to name or describe it. In this thesis I will discuss the cultural constraints of male dominance and female subordination in detail, and explore how the participants in my study make certain choices. Many choices are socially constrained, although not necessarily socially determined. However, choices, such as career choices or what subject to study at university, are not necessarily made because they are socially accepted, but because of the limited number of options available to them. For example, someone, male or female wishing to return to learning would find it easier to study an access course on literature or psychology rather than maths or physics, as the latter would probably not be as easily available, if at all. With the push to get women back in the workforce, as stated above, access courses have been aimed primarily at women and what course designers think women want.

At the same time as these developments on changing the workforce to be more appropriate to the needs of the economy, the key skills agenda was being introduced into higher education, and a number of universities were piloting

projects looking at the types of skills that could be developed and how effectively they could be recorded (for example, Nottingham, Sheffield Hallam, York). Key Skills at this time were divided into three 'main' or 'hard' skills of Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology (IT) which formed part of the Key Skills Qualification, at three levels. Alongside these were the 'softer' or 'wider' skills of Working with Others (WWO), Improving own Learning and Performance (IOLP) and Problem Solving, which were not accredited in terms of the overall qualification but could be gained additionally and individually by portfolio building. Universities were generally resisting the move to have an accredited qualification, but at the same time could see the value of developing employability skills to enhance the degree award.

Mature women accessing university for the first time, or returning after a number of years away would already have developed a number of skills through their life course, not necessarily just in previous employment, that will be of benefit to them in their studies. However, these skills, or the manifestation of these skills may not be identical to the skills valued on higher education courses. Concepts of power and knowledge, such as who decides what skills are more valuable than others and how women see themselves within the institution that is predominantly male oriented in terms of social structure and value systems, figure strongly in the development of my research questions.

Women, along with other disadvantaged and excluded groups in society, do not come to education on an equal footing with men. They bring with them histories and identities that have

been shaped by the social forces that surround them. Mature women in particular will bring with them a sense of their experience of the expectations and pressures of being women in a society that was constructed by men, and along with that, the need to fit into that discourse in higher education.

Sometimes, it is recognised that women's needs are different, but this is often problematised as helping them to fit in, rather than changing the system to allow them to be a meaningful member and contributor to that society. The common sense approach to this is to create legislation to make women equal and thus solve the problem without changing the cause. By seeing women as a problem, this makes them objects rather than subjects, the 'other' that has to be subjugated and controlled.

By giving the women in this study a voice, that is, not just a matter of speech, but a way of being seen and heard, I hope to be able to recognise the diversity of their experiences whilst also seeing what they have in common. This will enable the label of 'mature women' to be less marginalised and to acknowledge the blurring of the lines that delineate male/female experience. This is only one such binary opposite. Within the group who are participating in my study, there are differences in age, ethnicity, physical ability, class, all which bring different issues of identity with them. So each woman is different, and will experience higher education in a different way.

As my particular interest is skills, the focus of this research will be on how the skills of the participants fit into the general skills discourse. By using the example of key skills and the

differentiating factor of 'hard' and 'soft' skills, this will illuminate which may be valued more, which are given greater weight, and where the women's skills fit into this paradigm.

1.6: Research areas of investigation

The context for my research gives rise to an overarching area of investigation:

I would like to understand more about how some mature women students experience higher education.

However, this is too broad to answer fully within the scope of this thesis, and my interest is in how the participants experience higher education as women who have been in the world longer than most of their younger, more traditionally aged peers. Additionally, how do they deal with their experience and maturity within a higher education institution that is still being aimed at the young, straight from school or college student? As the expansion for alternative students continues, these women will bring to their courses a different range of experiences and these form the principle focus of my study. The subsidiary research questions are thus:

> **I would like to understand more about how some mature women students articulate and value skills they bring with them to higher education.**
>
> **I would like to understand more about the perceptions of mature women students of how the institutions of higher education value their skills.**
>
> **I would like to understand more about how mature women's perceptions of their skills change through undertaking degree courses.**

1.7: My own position in this research

My own personal and professional history has motivated me to undertake this thesis, and much of the general experience of the women in this study reflects my own. I will now discuss briefly how my background led me to enter higher education for the first time at the age of 39, in order to situate myself within the research context.

The change of educational system from single sex grammar school to fully comprehensive during my sixth form years (1968-1970) was disruptive and distracting, and along with many of my female contemporaries, I failed to reach my full potential. I left school after two years in the sixth form with no A-Level passes, but numerous high grade O-Level passes. To compound my failure, my parents felt justified in their objection to me attempting A-Levels. They had been persuaded to allow me to stay on in the sixth form by my

teachers who suggested I was 'university material'. They would have preferred me to take a 'good job' like my sister, as a bank clerk.

Years of office work, marriage and the care of three children left me dissatisfied intellectually, so, in 1987 I enrolled at my local further education college for one day a week with my mother-in-law looking after my children. After four years, I had gained four A-levels in Maths, English, Economics and History and after a further three years full time study I attained my first degree, a BA (Hons) in History. At this time, mature students were very much in the minority, and whilst I found academic satisfaction, there were also a number of associated factors which I did not feel were being addressed or acknowledged for mature women, and which I felt ultimately affected the outcome of my degree. These were mainly concerned with balancing my studies and my family in terms of lecture and seminar timetables, access to short loan library facilities, access to tutors and examination timetables. I often felt an outsider, and that I was not taken seriously by other students and tutors. At this particular point in time, I perceived my worries as practical, rather than philosophical, and saw them in terms of me fitting into the system rather than the system not accommodating me as a mature woman.

However, my interest in education led to further part time study towards a City & Guilds post-16 teaching certificate at my local further education college and a Master's Degree in Adult Education; these complemented each other as one was practical, the other theoretical. It was during this time that I read works by radical educators such as Paolo Freire (1972) and Jane Thompson (1980) and also became interested in

feminism, whereupon my own beliefs were challenged and new ideas began to develop and crystallise. My previous beliefs had been typical of the liberal feminists of the 1960s, namely, that if opportunities were open to men and women, then access would be equal, and therefore it was up to each person to make use of these opportunities. My views have since changed considerably, and are discussed further in chapter 4.

It was also during this time that two critical incidents brought together the idea for this thesis. The first was whilst working on a research project for the Centre for Research into the Education of Adults (CREA) at the University of Nottingham interviewing women in further education colleges who were retraining for work (Wallis & Mallia, 1996). Many of these women undervalued their life experiences and often expressed them in negative terms such as the oft-quoted 'just a housewife'. They had all worked before having families, and had gained numerous skills in running their lives, but were not seeing the value of them. What was important to them was retraining, mostly in their IT skills, and taking on a job that would fit around their families. This would probably be low paid, part time work. This was significant because it made me think of the wasted potential of many of these women because of the way they felt about themselves, or perhaps more precisely, how society thought about them and that they were internalising this notion. I have used examples from this research in some of the following chapters to illustrate how these women felt about themselves and their education.

The other incident was at a staff development session in the further education college where I was teaching part time. It was claimed that a group of volunteers following a course of key skills had achieved higher than expected grades in their course examinations. The majority of the volunteers were women. Although the evidence was only anecdotal, it led me to consider whether following a programme of key skills, or indeed any type of skills development course would help women to articulate their own skills and in turn, to increase self confidence and possibly enhance their normal academic experience.

I therefore became interested in how mature women would experience higher education, and whether a course which included key skills would make any difference to their own perception of their skills. Following this interest, I was able to identify a research project taking place aimed at embedding key skills in higher education, where each school or department taking part was approaching it in a different way. For ethical reasons, the university where this research was set has been anonymised and will be referred to as 'Central University' throughout this thesis. There were a number of schools within the university that were participating in this project, and I was able to identify a number of mature women who were about to begin their studies the following year. These Schools were the Department English Studies, the School of Sociology and Social Policy, and the School of Education (Post Graduate Certificate in Education). By discussing the experience of being involved in a school focussing on key skills with participants I hoped to be able to shed light on how the women were made aware of the skills

they would be developing and how much of their own experience would be valued.

As someone who entered higher education as a mature woman with young children, I struggled to find a perspective where I could move out of my own subjective position and to find a neutral standpoint in which to be able to hear the women's voices without influencing them myself. I soon realised that this was not possible or even desirable, and have subsequently found that working through a feminist methodology has allowed me to realise that there can be no such thing as objectivity, and that my own life history is unique. This position also allows me to empathise and make sense of other women's experiences, both as a woman and as a mature student in higher education.

1.8: Structure of the thesis

This introduction has outlined why this study is important, where I fit into it and what the main research questions are, reflecting the main themes of the research.

The next two chapters review the literature, firstly in chapter 2, on the gendered education of woman, both historically and also through school, college and university. Chapter 3 reviews the literature of key skills and the on-going debate of their place in education and the workplace[1].

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[1] See *post script* at end of this chapter overleaf

Chapter 4 is the methodology chapter which discusses the mainly qualitative approach I have taken, heavily influenced by feminist methodology. The chapter also introduces the participants and discusses how the main data collection has been carried out through interviewing. I also discuss the theoretical standpoint related to feminist theory and issues of knowledge and power, influenced by the work of Foucault and Freire, and the justification for taking this approach.

Chapter 5 is an analysis of the interviews and shows the evolution of the findings, and introduces the women and their stories in more detail. Chapter 6 is a discussion of the findings and recommendations, followed by chapter 7 which draws together concluding remarks.

1.9: Summary

This chapter has introduced the rationale for this thesis and the professional and personal motivation for the research. From the broader perspective of higher education in the last twenty years to the experience of a group of students within one institution of higher education, I hope to present the experiences of mature women students and their skills and how they value these skills themselves, before, during and after their time in university. Finally, I review the data and draw conclusions and recommendations.

Post script January 2010

When I began this research in 1998 I did not know at that stage that the longitudinal nature of the study would play such a prominent role. The literature reviewed at the outset

in chapters 2 and 3 served to inform the initial stages of my work and to provide the structure for the analysis of the data. However, at the end of the study I now recognise the extent to which there has been development in my field of study especially over the last few years. These developments have taken place in the fields of gender issues, key skills development and learning styles, and some examples are given in the following two paragraphs.

Key authors whose writing is pertinent in the field of skills development and learning styles in higher education contribute to an edited collection of recent empirical studies (Coffield, 2009). Chapters on their latest research are included by a number of authors whose work I have already used in this thesis, such as Young, Spours and Ball, and the edition also includes chapters on key skills in higher education (Dunne, Bennett & Carre) and Coffield's own critical analysis of learning styles and the learning society. A recent edition of Adults Learning (NIACE, 2009) includes an article by Tricia Hartley questioning the government's continuing emphasis on promoting full time higher education for young people rather than widening access for older students. Finally, key skills are currently being phased out to eventually be replaced by functional skills from September 2010 after a pilot which is currently taking place nationwide, and this is discussed in more detail in the conclusion to my thesis (http://www.qcda.gov.uk/6062.aspx 2010).

In the field of gender, much recent work concentrates on women in higher education rather than women mature students, but examples of two studies which pay particular attention to mature students within the edited or joint

authored books are given here. Firstly, Cotterill, Jackson & Letherby (Eds) (2007) in their study on lifelong learning examine the experience of women entering higher education. The book contains a chapter about women students who, they believe, now have greater access to higher education but find that the academic space is still gendered and classed. Other authors discussed in this thesis also present their latest research, such as Morley and Quinn. Similarly, Leathwood & Read (2009) question whether higher education has become feminised and consider what the resultant implications for woman students will be.

Thus the issues raised in my thesis are ongoing and in a state of continual development, and will require further empirical work in the years to come to contextualise the changing nature of the world of higher education and the on-going work of scholars in the field.

Chapter 2: The Education of Women

2.0: Introduction

This chapter examines and analyses the context for the research and through the literature and other empirical research studies explores how women have historically received a gendered education as children, both in school and the home, in order to identify themes that may be important for my research. It then goes on to discuss the university as a site of higher education. Within that section, there will be discussion based on the literature to date pertaining to the purposes and aims of higher education and the role of a university within that sector, its background and relevant changes such as the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). This leads to a further discussion on the increase in opportunities for access to higher education which have called into question what and for whom a university is for, and its relation to knowledge production. Within this discussion, I raise questions as to why mature women return to learning, and whether they have particular educational needs in terms of support, flexibility and approaches to learning. The position of mature women in higher education will be discussed in the final section where the constraints facing them are explored together with a section on women's subject choice, which is often affected by gender. There will thus be two sections to this chapter, one on gendered education, and the other on higher education, both having sub-sections within them.

2.1: Gendered Education

This first section will examine the ideologies of femininity in the educational context of home and school and the ways girls were traditionally socialised into their later roles as women. These ideologies are the qualities and behaviours that this particular society judges as being appropriate and desirable for women, such as patience, kindness and a caring nature. It will also explore and demonstrate how school acted as a social institution to reinforce the gender stereotypes begun in the home. School, in particular in the education of women, acted as a focal point for the societal structural transmission of this femininity and its place in the larger society. The time frame for this review is explained below.

The literature is reviewed firstly to provide an overview of the historical context of the gendered education of girls and women and secondly to critique schooling in more detail in the period in which the women in my study have been educated. It includes career advice they were given. This latter period is between the 1950s and 1980s.

2.2: Historical Development

Historically, the education of women has always been a contentious issue, with various arguments against it being put forward by men, and indeed, some women. These include ideas such as women having smaller brains, and therefore education could be too much of a strain upon them, possibly leading to insanity and infertility (Delamont, 1996). This was well illustrated in a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in

1892 about a woman with post natal depression being forced to abandon her intellectual pursuits by her husband and sister. It was written in the first person from a feminist perspective highlighting the inferior position women held in Victorian society. The unnamed woman was eventually locked in her bedroom and she went mad. It was initially rejected for publication as a male physician said reading it was enough to send anyone mad (Perkins Gilman, 1973).

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was similarly thought that by studying the literature of such authors as Byron or Chaucer, women could become corrupted. This argument was still apparent in the 1960s at the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* censorship trial, where the judge commented that he would not want his wife or servants to see it.[2] As women's ultimate goal was seen as marriage, education would therefore be wasteful, and even cruel if it gave them a false sense of destiny, promising a future that could never be (Tittle & Denker, 1980).

More enlightened attitudes in the nineteenth century led to some middle class girls being given the opportunity for education, but in feminine attributes such as sewing rather than algebra. Working class girls rarely received any education until the end of the nineteenth century when the imperative for a semi-literate workforce enabled them to receive a basic education. This was sporadic as the girls were

[2] The publisher of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D H Lawrence was the first to be charged under the Obscene Publications Act in 1960. The prosecuting Counsel, Mr Griffiths-Jones, famously remarked, 'Would you approve of your young sons, young daughters – because girls can read as well as boys – reading this book? Is it a book you would have lying around your house? Is it a book you would wish your wife or your servants to read?'

often absent from school caring for younger siblings or working in their own right (Deem, 1978). Compulsory education for children, both girls and boys, was not introduced until 1880 with Mundela's Education Act. Victorian middle class education was organised quite differently to working class education with different outcomes and purposes. Nevertheless, education in general at this time did overtly reflect women's role in society. The benefit of the education of women went to the economy, not to the women themselves for it prepared them for domestic responsibility which in turn freed men to do 'real work' outside the home.

Women in higher education were an even rarer sight. Some universities would take women to read certain subjects. Although one of the first women only colleges, Girton, was founded in 1869, degrees were not awarded to women until 1948. Some of the women who studied at the college earlier in the twentieth century have only been admitted as graduates of the university recently, in 1998 (Delamont, 1996).

The theoretical framework I have chosen to support this research, which will be explained in detail in the methodology chapter 4, confronts the gendered nature of society and women's place within that structure. The highly gendered nature of education can be seen by its effect on the socialisation process of preparing women for the role assigned to them by the prevailing male system (Oakley, 1974). Equal opportunities legislation such as the Sex Discrimination Act of 1970 is in place to explicitly counteract any prejudiced

behaviour towards women[3]. However, the entrenched beliefs concerning the role of women go further than this, and are deeply embedded within people's psyches. Even when one is aware of gender differentiation, it is often difficult to overcome deeply held beliefs instilled in childhood and accepted as the norm. For most of the women in my study, their experiences of schooling were in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and for some this forms a direct link with their reasons for returning to education now, to take up opportunities that were not available or were denied them at the time.

It is generally agreed by feminists that the sex of an individual shapes most aspects of her or his life and that gender role behaviour is culturally determined, both in the home and at school (for example, see Berryman, 1981; Oakley, 1974; Simms, 1996). From birth, many girls and boys are treated differently, with mothers talking to and touching their daughters more than their sons, and expecting girls to grow up quieter and cleaner than boys. This sex stereotyping becomes the common sense view that each person behaves naturally in a particular way appropriate to their gender, girls being passive and gentle, boys being rough and more aggressive (Deem, 1978). Certain types of behaviour can be seen as 'unfeminine' or 'unmasculine' if demonstrated by the 'wrong' sex. Girls who demonstrated masculine behaviour, were labelled 'tomboys', or considered unladylike, with the negative assumption of the binary ladylike/unladylike. Current ongoing research on tomboys and their siblings (Paechter, 2007) is positioning them as more

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[3] This has subsequently been amended to the Single Equality Act 2006 which includes the Gender Equality Duty whereby public bodies must take action to see whether gender inequalities exist and to overcome them, for both men and women.

feminine than their brothers and less feminine than their sisters. It is also well documented that children were given toys appropriate to their sex, and that girls helped their mothers with domestic work such as washing up and cooking, whereas boys tended to bring in the coal and do the gardening, reinforcing the stereotype of training for their future roles in society (Deem, 1987; Oakley, 1974). This can still be seen today in examples such as toy catalogues having pink pages for girls and blue for boys (for example, see the Argos catalogue, 2008).

2.3: Schooling

Education was overtly a very different experience for girls and for boys in the 1960s and 1970s:

> *There were powerful influences in girls' lives which suggested that their role was a very limited and particular one and it is clear that gender was a category of overwhelming importance in the structure and organisation of education, as well as in defining the educational experience of pupils* (Hunt, 1987, p XXV).

Differentiation was perpetuated through schooling, where, from an early age, girls were encouraged to play in a different space to the boys, with school playgrounds and entrances being segregated. Similarly, girls were expected to take part in different activities and games within the classroom, often using books which reinforced this stereotypical behaviour, such as the *Janet and John* series (Hopper, 1975; Oakley, 1974; Deem, 1978). For pre-school children there were television programmes such as *the Woodentops* about a

farming family which included Mrs Scrubbit, the cleaner. These types of books and programmes were often more stereotypically biased than real life, but were presented as the norm, thus confirming that this was the accepted model to aspire or conform to. In recent years, this discrimination has begun to be addressed and books are being rewritten to include the diverse cultural elements of society, and also showing less of a gender bias. The women interviewed for my research were all born during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, so it is likely that they have experienced this discriminatory former type of schooling and the internalisation of gender values described here.

Two studies by Dale Spender (1982; 1984) show how girls and boys are treated differently by their teachers in a subconscious way. The first study (1982) showed that, in a co-educational school, girls received approximately one third of the teachers' attention, reinforcing the implicit view that boys are more important and deserving of attention. One teacher who took part in the research was amazed at the results. Whilst being videotaped, she was aiming to give equal attention to both sexes but the overall ratio was still 36:64 in favour of the boys, even when the teacher thought she had overcompensated in trying to spend more time with the girls. It was observed that the girls remained docile and passive and the boys were authoritative and masterful, sometimes appearing aggressive if their needs were not met. In Spender's second study (1984), student teachers were given report cards to comment on, some with girls' names, and others with boys', but not necessarily the correct gender. The students gave more significance to the report when they thought it was that of a boy, with longer comments and

concern in areas where performance was poor, with suggestions as to how the teachers could help him improve. When they thought that the report was that of a girl, there were no such suggestions. Weaknesses in science and mathematics were not commented upon, which indicates that it was unconsciously assumed that this was to be expected of a girl. Deem (1978) also found that girls generally did better academically than boys at primary schools, but usually fell behind in maths and science once they moved to secondary school. Hopper and Osborn (1975) link this to the fact that girls were encouraged to concentrate on different, more feminine subjects, and they see this as a form of control, with the sciences having male gendered focused literature. In 1969, there were more male entrants for O level technical subjects and science, whereas CSE typewriting had 949 male entrants compared to 29 665 female entrants (Hopper & Osborn, 1975, p 135).

For the 80% of girls who were educated under the secondary modern system, as illustrated here, their education was very much focused on practical subjects. Selective education was introduced by the 1944 Education Act, where the Norwood Report identified that there were three types of children;

- those whose minds were academic;
- those who had a practical disposition; or
- those who were predominantly practical but were rooted in their immediate environment.

The Report suggested three types of schools, all of equal value, to cater for different needs;

- secondary grammar,
- secondary technical and
- secondary modern.

In reality, there were few technical schools set up and the divide between grammar and secondary modern was based upon selection at the 11plus examination, with the top 20% of children being offered places at grammar schools (Thom, 1987). Grammar schools were often single sex schools, but secondary moderns were predominantly co-educational.

Differences in how girls and boys should be taught in secondary schools were discussed at this time. In his book, *The Education of Girls* (1948), John Newsom castigated the education service for imposing a boys' curriculum on to girls', and advocated:

> *The vital educational objectives for women are to enable them to become accomplished homemakers, informed citizens and to use their leisure intelligently* (cited in Hunt, 1987, p 131).

Thus the post-war generation of girls were schooled in sewing, cooking, cleaning and other domestic skills, and sometimes, typewriting. Even within the grammar school system, certain non-academic subjects were gendered, with girls following domestic science and boys following wood and metalwork. There was no choice. Thus the school is teaching girls that their main role in life is to care for and service others, and as such, to be subordinate to men whose role it is to lead. As social policy changed towards the idealisation of

the family at this time, fewer educational opportunities became available to girls and women (Tittle & Denker, 1980).

During the early 1960s, the Labour party adopted a policy of introducing comprehensive education, abolishing grammar and secondary modern schools, seeing the latter as providing a second class education for boys as well as girls. The new comprehensives would cater for children of all levels and would all be mixed gender. Between 1964 and 1990, almost all secondary schools became comprehensives. There were also sociological changes that caused a rethink in how girls were educated. The baby boom meant that the crisis of reproducing the next generation was over and women could now be part of the workforce for longer, even though their ultimate career was still expected to be raising a family. Ollerenshaw (1961) writes about 'the more controversial problems of the education of girls', showing that the difference in education between girls and boys was seen as a problem rather than something that needed to be discussed. Her work is a justification for the education of girls, yet still has an idealised, almost saccharine view of them as ultimately future carers:

> *Most girls from about the age of 14 are usually down to earth and practical in their outlook, essentially realists, but they exhibit also an underlying idealism, sometimes even mysticism. They want to make their mark in society, to make good mothers and to serve. Some will cherish ideas of following a chosen career and all girls with a strongly marked vocational interest, such as a desire to nurse, to look after little children, to become*

architects or whatever it may be, will do their best to follow their inclination (p 22).

She writes very much from the liberal point of view, unconsciously blaming girls for their lack of success in the public sphere, whilst at the same time espousing 'Housecraft' as a curriculum topic:

> *When we consider that women have virtual equality of opportunity in education, at least within the schools, for over half a century, we are forced to admit that, as a group, women have made a relatively insignificant impact on national and international affairs* (p 80).

This lack of impact on the national and international stage by women may be linked to the limited aspirations that they were encouraged to foster. The section below explores how this has impacted upon how women feel about themselves and how their career advice compounded their educational and employment limitations.

2.4: Career advice in school

Schoolgirls were socialised by career advice when it was available. Some schools provided none, (my own, included) but the understanding was implicit that the girls should enter roles appropriate to their gender, for example, in a caring role such as nursing or teaching. These would have the added advantage of preparing them for their future roles as wives and mothers and caring for the next generation (Spender, 1984; Deem, 1978; Wallis and Mallia, 1996). Other girls were encouraged to take stop-gap employment in factories, shops

or offices, assuming that they would soon be married and start a family as their full time occupation. One route that was rarely, if ever considered as part of careers advice for girls was that into higher education. Many girls from working class backgrounds never considered further or higher education because they were socialised into thinking that it was for others, not for them. Their future was to take a low paying job, of which there were plenty in the 1960s and 1970s. My own research (Mallia, 1997) with mature women entering further education for the first time reveals the disappointment and frustrations they felt when they were given no choice on leaving school. Typical comments were:

> *I'm one of six children. I've got five brothers. When it got to me, I'm a girl and I got it drilled into me that girls just got married.*

> *My career advice from my mother was, 'why don't you go into hairdressing because then when you have a baby and get married you can go back into it?'*

> *I didn't get much out of school. It was always geared towards the boys. When it came to career options we were directed into traditional women's roles and none of that seemed to suit me* (p 11).

Local companies would recruit directly from schools and girls were encouraged to take these jobs. These would normally be factory, telecommunications or office employers. It was easy and quite usual at that time, to change jobs frequently as there was plenty of this type of work available. When Robbins (1963) commented that there was wastage of girl

school leavers who did not go to university despite having the academic ability or at least the potential, he was not referring to equal opportunities but rather that it was not in the best interests of the nation's economic needs. The reasons for the non-participation of many women in post-compulsory education were not those of ability but of attitudes and expectations (Pearce, 1990). It was not in the culture of groups such as working class women, older women, ethnic groups, the unskilled, disabled people and other disadvantaged groups to have expectations of carrying on with formal education. Many had written off their school background as a negative experience and did not want to prolong it with further study. However, there were some who had enjoyed school, but were never given the opportunity to study further. This was typical of the background of some of the women interviewed for this current study, which will become clearer in the findings reported in chapter 5.

To summarise this section, the women who will participate in my study are likely to have experienced such a gendered education, mostly from birth and the cultural reproduction of this gender stereotyping through their schooling, whether overtly or not. These women would have been subjected to the pressures of society to conform as caring people, being educated for their future as wives, mothers and carers. This may be a generalisation for society as a whole, but for the participants in the study, this would probably have been their reality from which they are now attempting to break away in their journey through higher education.

The second section in this chapter will discuss the historical development of universities and reforms that have occurred in

higher education, beginning with the influential Robbins
Report in 1963, with increasing emphasis on the years since
polytechnics and universities all became universities in 1992.
Having discussed the historical developments, there will then
be a section on the current debates on what a university is
for, and the tensions between teaching and research which
may affect the participants in this current research, and in
which they may situate themselves. There then follows a
section on the literature on mature women students and the
constraints they may face, and finally a section on subject
choice and how it may often be gendered.

2.5: Higher education

Universities in Great Britain developed gradually during the
Middle Ages when learned scholars grouped together, and
these communities were originally set up to serve the most
powerful section of society, the church, by training its clerics,
who were all male, to uphold its doctrine. This group later
included a new lay elite, those needed to administer the
realm, such as lawyers and diplomats (Rowland, 2001). These
were again always male. This section discusses the literature
pertaining to the historical and philosophical changes in
higher education with particular emphasis on how they affect
women. After a brief summary of the development of
universities and of their rapid growth over the last fifty years,
literature relating to the experience of women accessing
higher education in the last twenty years will be reviewed.
There is also a discussion on the changing attitudes of what a
university is for, namely to support the economy or to
produce critically conscious people. Again, this debate will
reflect where mature women fit in, where appropriate.

2.6: Background

The admission of women into higher education has been hailed as a critical factor in changing the social position of women, yet initially, they had only restricted access, and could only read certain subjects. For example, in the early years of women being allowed to enter universities, *circa* the mid nineteenth century, a woman who had gained access to university was not actually able to go to the library to collect books for herself, but had to send a maid, and she would have to sit in a separate gallery from the men in lectures (Williams, 1987; Delamont, 1996). These were mainly middle class women who, in the liberal sense, were not attempting to change the traditional role of women within society; it was more of a personal ambition to access education. The type of work they did afterwards was still linked to the caring role concerned with philanthropy and children. Many became teachers. However, some did become role models for other women who could see that it was not impossible for women to break into the male preserve, albeit in a small way.

Higher education was generally considered a preserve of the future male ruling class (Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003), for a minority that could pay for the advantages a higher education would bring. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the main universities in Great Britain were at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. Robbins (1963) reports that there were only 20,000 students of both sexes in full time education in 1900 and this figure included postgraduates. Unfortunately, the figures were not analysed by gender. In the period up to the First World War, established colleges of

education began to receive university status, and were able to confer their own degrees. These colleges became known as 'redbricks' as they were already physically established buildings in the Victorian era. These included Birmingham, Sheffield and Bristol. More colleges received royal charters after the Second World War, such as Nottingham in 1948. In the mid-1950s, new universities were established, not based upon the foundations of former colleges but they were given university status straight away. They were built on greenfield sites in smaller cities, such as York and Warwick (Archer *et al*, 2003). This latter expansion was as a result of the selective education set out in the 1944 Act, where those progressing to grammar schools also expected to progress to university, and thus expansion was needed to provide enough places. There had been moves for greater expansion of higher education from various sources for social justice purposes, and the Robbins Committee was set up to:

> *Review the pattern of full-time education… and to advise…on what principles its long term development should be based* (in Archer *et al*, 2003, p 6).

2.7: The Robbins Report

The Higher Education Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-3, is usually known as the Robbins Report (1963). It is one of the two[4] most significant government reports highlighting the background to this research as it opened up opportunities to a wider group of

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[4] the other being the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) headed by Lord Dearing.

people, especially women, to access higher education. It was Robbins who recommended that universities should be open to all those who could aspire through ability alone:

> *Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so* (Committee for Education, 1963, p8).

It was not aimed at any particular group such as women or mature students but was egalitarian and liberal in its purpose. It did lead to an overall expansion of student numbers, including women, in the 1970s, yet the proportion of adult students, that is, those over 21 years of age, did not radically change. The establishment of the institutes of technology, or polytechnics as they became to be known, between 1969 and 1973 led to further expansion, but failed to attract women as the courses on offer tended to be vocational and did not necessarily appeal to them (Williams, 1997; Deem, 1978). From the second half of the 1970s, with the development of the Open University and sociological changes linked to the control of fertility, more women began to take advantage of the opportunity to enter higher education. The Open University was established to provide part time courses in higher education, mainly based on distance learning, and with learning materials provided and often supported by television programmes. Summer schools sited at regular universities were organised so that students could have an experience of higher education such as seminars, and which fit around many people's other commitments, either work or family.

These changes had an impact on university entrants. Between 1975 and 1980, the male intake to higher education increased by 11% whereas female intake rose by 30% (Weinrech-Haste, 1984). Mature entrants also increased. Brookfield's work (1986) showed that adults were the fastest growing client group in higher education. She quotes that in 1979, 23.2% of the student population was made up of students of over 21 years of age. However, there is no gender split for this figure, indicating that women were perhaps not considered a group worth analysing at this time. As with the Robbins figures already quoted of the number of students in higher education in 1900, gender was not considered a significant factor in data analysis at this time.

Another major change affecting higher education was the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act where the binary system of polytechnic colleges and universities was abolished, and under this same act, further education colleges became self-financing. This led to competition between 'old' (universities already established as such in 1992) and 'new' (those which had been polytechnics or colleges and were now classed as universities) universities and the further education colleges to attract new students. In order to shoulder their new financial burdens, colleges began marketing courses for groups previously not targeted, in particular, mature women (Wallis & Mallia, 1996).

This targeting can also be explained by looking back to the 1970s and the realisation by the government that for a modern democratic society to be economically efficient, it needed a more educated and flexible workforce (Edwards, 1997; Mallia, 1997). As already discussed, demographic

predictions of a fall in the number of young students in the 1980s meant that other types of students needed to be recruited. Hopper and Osborn's work (1975) echoes the Robbins Report by considering the wasted pool of female school leavers. They stress that the waste of talent was due to selective schooling at the age of 11. In their analysis, in 1975, mature students tended to be male, then:

> …the waste of talented females is so much greater than for males…that it can only be described as colossal. It follows that the pool of female adults who are potential students is likely to be very large indeed. Any further expansion of education for adults is likely to draw more from them than any other group (p 137).

This reflects the under use of women's skills and academic abilities which is the focus of this research. Women returning to learning possess a number of skills which they have developed through their schooling and in their adult lives, which can only benefit them if they wish to re enter education either through a further education college or directly to university.

2.8: Increased opportunities for access to HE

As a result of the Robbins Report, more people began to access higher education. Most literature points to the 1970s as the time when the numbers of women in higher education began to increase (Pearce, 1990; Deem, 1978). Up until this time, mature women wishing to study for a degree had to take the route of two A-levels, or to apply directly to the university. Some institutions would set entrance

examinations or base their decision on an interview with the prospective student. At this time, too, adult or *extra mural* education was seen as separate from the traditional school/college or school/university routes, and would often be accessed through the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) or universities offering this type of course, but outside their walls. The very expression is exclusive –'outside the walls' – and courses were usually part-time, non-academic and not certificated.

Many younger women were thus beginning to take the opportunity of a university education. There were many more mature women waiting in the wings, but unable to take advantage of the same opportunities because of barriers still in their way. These barriers were numerous; physical barriers such as finance and child care were probably the most prohibitive, but also the internalised gender barriers outlined earlier in this chapter, where the expectation of women was to be wives and mothers and not to aspire to higher education. These women would not have the qualifications to go forward to university without sustained study for their A-Levels, the typical standard required for entry. Governments of the day were beginning to see the potential of this group and began to take measures to remove some of these barriers.

2.9: Access to higher education

During the 1970s and 1980s, mainly because of the changes in work practices due to the developing globalisation of the economy, many women were returning to work on a temporary and usually part-time basis, particularly in the

growth areas of the service industries, often associated with women's work. Hart (in Edwards, 1992, p35) calls this the 'housewifisation' of the economy – low wages, insecurity disguised as flexibility and few employment rights. As women were updating their skills in further education colleges, most markedly in information technology (IT) in order to re-join this workforce, they provided a fertile recruiting ground as candidates for progression on to higher education.

In order to encourage the non-traditional students, especially mature women, to enter higher education, there needed to be changes to the admissions structure, which had been based on either two grades at A-level or on interview. Many who had taken a break in their education did not have A-level qualifications. Also linked to the economic imperative behind new educational policy, more vocational routes were being developed, and by 1987, vocational qualifications such as the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) became the second route into university (Williams, 1997). This route tended to be that taken by young males.

In the same year, 1987, access courses were accepted as the third way into higher education and this is the route favoured by most mature women. Davies and Parry's work (1993) studies the evolution of the access course from small beginnings as experimental pockets of activity in the early 1980s to their validation in 1987 with the National Framework for the Recognition of Access Courses which formalised them and assessed quality assurance. These courses were set up for mature students who had no conventional qualifications and they combined subject knowledge with the generic skills required in higher education (Hayes, King & Richardson,

1997). The courses were mainly offered through further education colleges, but some university adult education departments also ran them. Since then, access courses have been widely available and attract a large number of women (Wallis & Mallia, 1996). Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) statistics show that there were 30,000 students on over 1000 access courses in 1994, over half of them in the humanities and social sciences (in Hayes, King and Richardson, 1997, p2). The subjects are significant because the colleges were hoping to attract women to the courses and therefore offered the courses in these subjects which were felt to be traditionally female. The issue of subject choice is explored in more detail later in this chapter. The majority of the undergraduate participants who have volunteered for this study had followed this route to university.

2.10: Why some women return to learning

Much of the literature written in the 1970s and 1980s on why women return to learning has been based on questionnaires and/or single interviews. Most women in these studies tended to cite a single reason which would often be linked to a life changing experience, such as their children becoming less dependent upon them, a divorce or redundancy. Other reasons cited were the need to retrain for employment because of missed opportunities when they were younger, or their rejection of education at an early age due to lack of encouragement or fulfilment (see Hopper & Osborn, 1975; Tittle & Denker, 1980; Brookfield, 1986). More recent, longitudinal or qualitative studies question this single motive (Pascall & Cox, 1993; West, 1996). Firstly, I will discuss the

earlier research, as it may throw some light on the issues pertinent to this study.

In their study of adult students, Hopper and Osborn (1975) give the main reason for the participation of adult women in higher education as compensatory, where they seek fulfilment in education now that they no longer feel needed by their families as their children grow up. It is seen as a chance to take part in something that is meaningful, not necessarily remunerative. There is an implicit assumption in their work that the women are financially supported by their husbands and do not need to work for a living wage. Higher education is seen here as an end in itself, rather than leading to employment. Tittle and Denker (1980) similarly reinforce this stereotype of the female returner in the 1970s, where they describe 'her' typically as a woman aged late thirties or early forties, married, living in the area of the university they attend and with husbands who are usually either professionals or students themselves. They study in one of the traditional female subjects – education, social sciences or humanities. There is a discussion on subject choice later in this chapter.

Those who wish to enter employment often turn to their local further education college to either update their skills or to find a new direction. The following chapter will discuss in further detail the links between skills, education and employment. Often, women do not want to return to the type of work they did previously as it was unsatisfying and paid a low wage. From these small beginnings, many continue with their education on access courses and then progress to higher education. Many do not have a clear idea what direction to

take at first, and then feel drawn to study an area that reflects their life experience, or enhances and validates something they feel good at. Two examples from interviews I have carried out with women in a further education college (Mallia, 1997) show the way they thought through their ideas, starting from the base of what they thought they could reasonably achieve as women:

> *I've had a lot to do with hospitals [because of personal health reasons]⁵ so I do know how it works. I don't see myself on the wards [as a nurse] – occupational therapy came up – that's diverse – social science – I like the sound of that.*

> *I wanted to get as far away as possible from alcoholism [her husband's] but I've realised that there's a lot I can actually give to somebody else in that position…I think I've got a lot of experience on my own to actually put into something like that [social work].⁶*

Research in the 1980s looked at curriculum choices for all women undergraduates, not just mature women. Weinreich-Haste's study (1984) showed a predominance of women in education (68.9%), sociology (64.2%), and psychology (66.7%), yet in physics (15.5%) and engineering (6.8%), the numbers of women were minimal. The aspirations of her respondents were to attain a career that would fit around family life and in an occupation in which they felt they were helping and working with people, and which made full use of

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⁵ square brackets indicate where I have inserted text to give the statement meaning.
⁶ This selection from the interview data was not published, therefore there are no page numbers.

their abilities, as in the two examples above. These gender imbalances are also reflected in the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) statistics for women in further education colleges in the East Midlands in 1993 (Wallis and Mallia, 1997), where the percentage of women in engineering was 10% and in the humanities, 62%.

At that time, it was expected that working and studying would be taken on in addition to caring, so it was a prime consideration then to choose a career that would fit around all eventualities, or at best, be as flexible as possible. Generally, men are able to divide career and family into two separate spheres of their lives, whereas women have to consider a career that overlaps with family life (Tittler and Denkin, 1980). At this time, women would most likely still have primary care for children and be responsible for household duties such as shopping and housework (Oakley, 1974). Women's lives also interweave with other families apart from their own as they may also have responsibility for parents, in-laws and possibly step-children (Hayes, 1997). So choice for women is limited and can often be a pragmatic one. This may be reflected to some extent in the experience of my participants.

More recent work has focused on looking behind the accepted reasons why women enter higher education, usually given as wanting to enhance employment prospects. This is a perceived acceptable response to the question, as this would bring material rewards and status for many women, when they left school and when they had neither. Pascall & Cox's qualitative study (1993a) illustrates the complex nature of mature women's motivation and reasons for study. Their

work is also reflective, as they were able to re-interview half of their original cohort eight years after they were first interviewed. The outcomes of their interviews point mostly towards education as a site of opportunity rather than breaking the bonds of patriarchal structures, showing how women were taking advantage of opportunities to develop their own lives within the existing system. The authors reflect that much of the literature to date (1993a) was concerned with oppressive schooling rather than higher education which they see as something different and they pose the question:

> *We should ask whether women returning to study as adults have such a different experience of educational structures that they should be set outside the debate about the nature of education for girls and treated as an exceptional group* (Pascall & Cox, 1993a, p 141).

However, more personal reasons may also be related but not voiced. West (1996) conducted in depth interviews with mature students who were asked why they were returning to learning. His work explores the more intricate and compound reasoning behind their motives. The respondents gave the usual reasons at first, but it became apparent in succeeding interviews that this was only part of the picture:

> *As the students reflected on these statements in subsequent sessions, their objectives were gradually subsumed within more complex narratives of frustration, fragmentation and marginalisation in existing lifestyles, and of patterns of low self esteem, disrupted education, family and personal unhappiness over a lifetime* (West, 1996, p 34).

The following example illustrates this fragmentation of self and changes over time. One woman from his study, who was training to be a teacher, initially stated that she always wanted to be a teacher, yet, in further interviews she revealed that her marriage was in trouble and her husband treated her as if she were stupid. She blamed herself for the failure and hoped that by becoming a teacher she would make a better partner for him. She was still internalising her upbringing where she was expected to be selfless, dutiful and submissive. Her education now allowed her to realise and recognise her own oppression, made her more assertive and to contemplate leaving her husband. West (1996) adopts a psychoanalytical framework to his study, so the interviews often appear to be more of a counselling nature than sociological. However, it does bring out the complexity of the interviewees' lives, looking at the sense of self which he describes as 'the paradox of self in late capitalist modernity' (p 14). It clearly shows how narratives can change over time. This is important for my study as the research is conducted over a period of time before, during and after the participants take part in higher education, and any analysis needs to take this into account. As discussed in more detail in the methodology in chapter 4, by reflecting on their experiences over time, they may develop a deeper sense of their place within the world and have changes in their thinking.

This unpicking of the complex nature of the reasons for mature women returning to learning shows a deeper understanding of the needs of mature women students in that they cannot be generalised into fitting into existing

structures. The next section identifies the different needs and gives examples of work that highlights this.

2.11: The different educational needs of mature women

This section discusses the different needs of mature women as opposed to their younger counterparts. Women who study on access courses will have been exposed to a more self-directed learning approach than younger students who are under pressure to gain high grades at A-Level, and will probably have been taught differently. This is a generalisation, but the literature shows that mature women do have different needs and skills which need to be taken into account along with other forms of teaching and learning.

Once again, the literature on mature women students can be divided into two groups. Work in the 1970s and 1980s tended to treat either adult students of both genders as one homogeneous group, or to similarly treat mature women as a group (see Brookfield, 1986; Tittle & Denker, 1980). More recent writing reflects the trend away from this to a more post-modern, individual study of what mature women students are in response to their own history and sense of self (McNair, 1998; Lea & West, 1995; Williams, 1997).

During this former period, mature students were the fastest growing client group in universities. In 1979, 23% of students were over 21 (Brookfield, 1986), whereas a decade later, mature entrants were in the majority for the first time, and have been increasing ever since (McNair, 1998). These figures refer to male and female students over 21, whereas my study is of women over 25, yet the comments of McNair

are still pertinent when he says higher education must change to meet the needs of different types of students. Although political pressure and the changes in vocational education had led to a rethink in terms of more emphasis on work-based learning, distance learning, modularisation and credit accumulation, these do not necessarily address the needs of the ever increasing and disparate mature student body:

> *The shift, over a single generation, from a higher education system providing for some eight per cent of the population as they made the transition from school to adulthood to one catering for perhaps half the population, many of them already well established in adult life, was undoubtedly disruptive, but it led to considerably less debate about fundamental purposes and structures than one might have expected* (McNair, 1998, p 163).

However, in 1993, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) published *An Adult Higher Education; a Vision*. This called for a redefinition of what higher education should be. It called for a change from subject centred to student centred learning, where knowledge was not something to be transmitted from lecturer to student as the empty vessel, but more on the Freirian model where new knowledge is created continually between the lecturer and student, making meanings from understandings and perceptions. Many mature women expect a more proactive education than the one currently being offered. Other writers such as Giroux (1983) and Weil (1989) were drawing on the work of Freire during the 1980s and questioning what higher

education should be. Their philosophical ideas will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

Brookfield's work (1986) similarly questions the idea of learning as just the transmission of knowledge and claims that in order to develop a sense of personal power and self worth, adults need self-directed learning. He runs courses on the principle that students raise their critical consciousness, enabling them to challenge values and behaviour in society and to reflect critically on their position in this world. Later work by Hayes, King and Richardson (1997) suggested that this type of education was already being attempted to some degree on access courses where a more appropriate student based learning took place, with the emphasis on the learner not the knowledge. This is characterised by the search for meaning outlined by Brookfield. However, this type of learning can have a backlash on the access students if it is inconsistent with the learning and teaching culture of the majority of universities. These students may be approaching higher education with different learning styles to the mainstream, younger students, and have greater expectations. If students are unable, or unwilling to negotiate between the two, the long-term consequences may affect the outcome of their degree:

> *Too great a contrast between the educational culture of access courses and degree courses runs the risk of adjustment problems and the danger of failure on the degree course* (Brennan, cited by Hayes, King & Richardson, 1997, p 21).

As Brennan points out, this is partially reflected in the work of Hayes *et al* (1997) who found that the majority of access students completed their degrees successfully. Nevertheless there was a higher drop-out rate and a lower final degree performance level for access students than the younger university students. The authors drew the conclusions that higher education is not adapting to the changing demands of the post industrial society, and so that if mature students are to be encouraged to participate fully in the higher education experience and to achieve their full potential, changes in teaching and learning must be made to encompass the different learning styles. Raising students' critical consciousness is meant to be empowering and will enable them to recognise that matters are not as they should be in the educational circles in which they move in higher education. If they feel they are not valued and have no power to change matters, this could be equally disempowering and disappointing, and could be reflected in the outcome of their studies and perhaps their own feelings of self esteem.

In summary, according to the research studies quoted here, mature women students, particularly those who have attended access courses will have developed a critical consciousness to some extent, and will have different learning styles and needs to other, younger students. With the increase in the numbers of students attending university, they will still be a minority. The next section discusses the implications of the increased numbers of students accessing higher education, now referred to as the 'massification' of higher education and explores the literature relating to who and what higher education is for, and the changes that have

been put in place since the general increase in student numbers. This will then relate to how the mature women in this study position themselves once in higher education in terms of their identity and learning needs.

2.12: The Dearing Report 1997

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, headed by Sir Ron Dearing, was appointed in 1995, and the result is usually known as the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Its remit was to look at ways in which to maximise participation in higher education and also at the implications of the reorganisation of universities following on from the 1992 Act when the existing polytechnics became universities. There was also emphasis on suggesting changes in funding arrangements for the universities as there had been no major investigation since the Robbins Report in 1963, and the economic climate had changed vastly since then. Neither was there much consistent data available about students. Archer *et al* (2003) show that there was no socio-economic profile of 50% of the population entering university at that time who were aged 21 or above (p 67).

The implications of the internal changes to higher education are stronger with the reforms of the 1990s than those that followed the Robbins report in 1963. Robbins was more concerned with external changes and did not challenge the values or purposes of higher education. With 'masssification' and the increase in student numbers following the reforms of the early 1990s, change was sought from within the universities to cater for the increased numbers and to provide the economy with an educated workforce. The Dearing report

sought to recommend such changes. The implications for mature students from the Dearing Report will be discussed later, but I will now discuss the recent literature on what a university is for in the changing world of increasing numbers and changing clientele in order to understand the context for the participants of this study.

2.13: What is a university for?

The problems faced by higher education in the mid-1990s arise from a system which has become mass in its size but which remains elite in its values (Schuller, 1995, p 21).

Schuller's comment raises two issues I would like to discuss below. Firstly, the effect that the Research Assessment Exercise has had on the relationship between research and teaching, leading to elite universities wanting to be known as research-led, and the idea that this may be devaluing teaching. Secondly, the huge increase in student numbers means that fewer graduates will work within the field they are studying, and thus there is a tension between developing an academic and critical frame of mind and responding to the need to prepare students for work. I will then link these two ideas to show how they may affect mature women students.

One of the major influences on teaching and learning in recent years has been the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which is an exercise undertaken every five years or so to evaluate the quality of research and to reward institutions accordingly by funding in the selective distribution of public money. Much has been written about the divisive nature of

this exercise that the research quality is based on how many prestigious journal articles and chairing of key conferences academics have produced or been involved with, rather than on the scholarship of teaching (Elton, 2000; McNay, 2003; Nadin, 1997). Indeed, a proportion of panel members judging the exercise are from industry and professions, the so-called 'users of the research', so the judgement is not just from other academics. The unintended consequences (Elton, 2000; Hare, 2002) have led to the poaching of high flying academics for their eligibility for submission to the RAE, which may have a knock on effect on the synergy between research and teaching.

The implications for teaching have been to undermine teaching at the expense of research, and to devalue it. This reflects the binary divide mentioned earlier, where the two are set against each other, with one having a lesser value than the other. Nadin (1997) suggests that universities are being pushed into becoming research-led or teacher-led, with the most prestigious universities being research-led. The preparation of teaching materials is actually exempt from the RAE, and not considered research. Broadhead and Howard (1997) call the RAE 'The Art of Punishment' and argue from a Foucauldian position that this narrow, ideological definition of research:

> *has both exacerbated the false split between teaching and research and tended to stress the superior relevance – in terms of the quality of intellectual endeavour, the practical benefit to the economic well-being of the country, etc – of the latter* (p 9).

The concentration on publishing and preparing for submission actually reduces time for out of class discussions and individual times with students. The implication of this for all students is detrimental, but for mature students who have been used to individual tuition and support through their access courses, the implication is more serious. It has been shown (McGivney, 1996, 2004; Hagedorn, 1999; Moxley *et al*, 2000) that mature students in particular need a lot of support early on, and value the sense of intimacy with a tutor. Along with the increase in student numbers, this assessment exercise has led to most students being taught by staff who are not recognised as 'research active', as they are either in institutions that are teacher-led, thus not concentrating on research or those that are in research-led where the academics are concentrating on their publications at the expense of their teaching, and others do it for them. Yet, for all this discussion, there is no evidence to suggest that those academics who concentrate on their publications would be better teachers, if they had the time to teach. Hughes (2005) calls it a myth that there is a relationship at all between teaching and research, and that this belief has become an academic ideology that itself needs to be challenged.

The second point for discussion is brought about by the 'massification' of higher education. This massification is the move from an elitist system where only approximately 15% have access to higher education to one where up to 40% have access (Scott, 1995). It was once considered an achievement to gain a place at university and something to be celebrated, yet today it is just the next stage in education for many, requiring no exceptional merit to gain a place. The

gradual increase over the 1990s has brought the figure up to around 40% yet Scott argues that it is still elitist, that the constituency from which the expanded numbers of students come is still middle class and that the expansion has had little effect on social attitudes to higher education, which will certainly have implications for the mature women participants in this study.

The massification of higher education creates a tension over what higher education is for, a critical education or an education for employment, and whether they are mutually exclusive. The leading writer in this field is Ronald Barnett (e.g. 1997, 2000, 2003, 2005) who first questioned what a university was for. He felt that the expansion and reasons behind that expansion were eroding the idea of critical thinking and that higher education had now moved to serve the needs of industry rather than the needs of the student. However, he accepted that universities must still respond to external imperatives and this may not always be a bad scenario, as long as it is done in a critical manner. Therefore, the acquisition of skills is still important but should not be seen in isolation, and should reflect the wider changes in society to some extent.

As already noted, in the section in this chapter on the Robbins Report, the blurring of what a university is came from 1992 when some institutions that were predominantly technical became universities, therefore the idea of a university education for its own sake became blurred with an education for training in certain skills. There is pressure on universities to respond to government or local industries to produce graduates fit for employment on graduation.

Barnett's argument (1997) is that the idea of critical thinking should be extended from the narrow definition within university to encompass a wider 'critical being' where students critically examine the wider world and themselves, allowing them to take action and change their world. This would need a rethink of the current definitions of knowledge that is held as valuable in universities, and how knowledge should not be seen in terms of competencies and skills but in a broader social way he calls wisdom.

He further argues (2000) that the knowledge function of universities is being undermined, that it is no longer unique and has no particular status in society; that it only reflects the needs of a privileged group in society and that in marketing its knowledge, it loses its power. However, in what he calls 'the age of supercomplexity', he puts forward an optimistic argument that new frames of knowledge can be developed that reflect the complex and uncertain world of higher education and society. This is a useful analysis of the dilemma cited above between research and teaching, and how academics struggle to retain their professional integrity.

To summarise, universities have traditionally been seen as the creators and disseminators of knowledge, yet the post-modern fragmentation of knowledge challenges this, that universities can no longer claim to be the sole producers of knowledge and the privileged disseminators. The massification of higher education which resulted in the onus of payment for higher education onto the student has resulted in the commodification of knowledge, with the student as consumer (Smith & Webster, 1997; Scott, 1995). Other

sources of knowledge, markedly the internet, are available to more and more people, and the expectation from a university degree has changed, being linked more to employment than for its own sake. External pressures have also affected how this knowledge is created by producing an artificial divide between teaching and learning. These are crucial issues that university staff are dealing with on a daily basis, and, as can be seen above, the pressures have increased over the last few years. This may have an impact on the participants in this study, particularly on their expectations of a university education, which is perhaps based on a more personal relationship.

The following section turns to mature women students in higher education in particular, and discusses the literature on their experience of higher education, with special attention to the constraints and barriers many of them face.

2.14: The invisible majority

During the 1990s, there was a limited discussion on how mature students fare in higher education, and whether adult learning is different from or the same as initial learning (McNair, 1998; Scott, 1996; Pascall & Cox, 1993A). Those who espouse the idea that it is the same usually see learning as a transmission of knowledge from one person to another and thus mature students should be able to fit into the existing system. On the other hand, McNair (1998) believes that for mature students, learning should fit around them as they usually have other roles and responsibilities outside higher education. Mature students bring greater motivation and knowledge of themselves to their course as full and equal

members of society, therefore have a right to determine what they wish to learn and how. The issues set out below may be mirrored and discussed by the interviewees for this thesis, particularly in their first life history interviews which will take place before they begin their courses.

For most mature women, taking on a course of study is usually in addition to domestic duties and often includes childcare and part-time work. Apart from these practical problems, there can be unforeseen problems of a more emotional nature. Harris and Brooks (1998) divide these challenges into three categories: institutional, situational and dispositional. I will use this typology as a basis for my analysis of recent literature on the issues. Most of this early literature groups mature women as a homogeneous entity, but some important issues are raised nevertheless. This typology will also be used for data analysis in Chapter 5.

2.15: Institutional constraints

Institutional problems are those connected with the university once mature students have gained access, such as timetabling, childcare facilities or age-inappropriate student services (Harris & Brooks, 1998). Those who have reached university through access courses, which is the majority of women in my study, had been able to take advantage of cheap or even free childcare, and a timetable that was organised around school hours. It can come as a shock to realise this is not taken into account at university, and women sometimes have to forgo certain courses due to timing. Childcare is sometimes not available, or may be restricted to certain hours and can be expensive. Many adult women see

themselves as workers and mothers first, students second, yet now have to be more flexible around the institution rather than *vice versa* (McNair, 1998; Simms, 1996).

2.16: Situational constraints

Recent research on the experience of women returning to learning via further education colleges has shown that adult learners need guidance and counselling in order to develop and adjust to their new environment of higher education, particularly in the early stages when they are not sure what is expected of them (Pearce, 1990; West, 1996; Merrill, 1998; Murphy & Fleming, 1998). These writers suggest that the leap from further education to higher education is too great a shock; that mature students are left to sink or swim, compared with younger students who are already on the right wavelength to cope with the transition from school to university. For them it is just the next step in their educational process. Yet for one mature women:

> *It was like moving into strange territory without understanding the language or appreciating the cultural conventions* (West, 1998, p 196).

Perceptions of teaching and learning in higher education was the focus of two studies, Merrill (1998) and Murphy & Fleming (1998), both based on interviews with mature students. Mature students from access courses were accustomed to considerable feedback on their work, and were not receiving the same level of support in their written work once they got to university. Some felt out of their depth and had to learn very quickly to become more independent learners, or to 'play

the higher education game' as some put it. In West's study, some students reported feeling disappointed with their first essay as they had been trying to write in a subjective way, but had been criticised for being too personal. One lecturer had:

> *disparaged the personal as anecdotal and unreliable in comparison to more objective understanding* (West, 1996, pp 204-5).

The woman who had received this feedback was being forced to leave her personal experience of life behind and she perceived it as a personal amputation. A student from Murphy & Fleming's interviews (1998) stated that she had to 'twist my whole mind round' in order to achieve what was required to fit the academic style she knew was the key to success. Students were thus feeling that they had to compromise what they felt was the relevance of their life experience that informed their work, and which they had been encouraged to share on their access course. They were being forced to make their experiential knowledge more general, putting themselves at a distance from that knowledge to try to understand it in a more critical way and place it within a more intellectual and analytical framework. Comments from all three aforementioned studies reveal that it was the students who felt they were always being the ones asked to change, to fit in with the prevailing system. They had thought that a university education would allow them to pursue and expand their intellectual interests. However, from a pragmatic point of view, their primary aim changed to passing examinations and getting a degree rather than pursuing knowledge for its own sake, when realism replaced idealism (Merrill, 1998).

Situational constraints also proved difficult when trying to fit into the established system, mainly due to lack of time and money. Some women had part time jobs as well as homecare duties; others felt a distinct lack of support from their partners, both practical and emotional (Harris & Brooks, 1998). Oakley's work on the sociology of housework in 1974 is still relevant here. Her investigations found that most women were dissatisfied with housework and that very few men shared or took an active part. Social attitudes treat housework as women's work, therefore, being unpaid, as having no status. Interestingly, however, the women in Harris & Brooks' study did not feel they were being oppressed and had rejected the ideas of 'women's libbers' of the early 1970s, wanting to keep *status quo* within the family. This attitude was also apparent in earlier work such as that by Tittle & Denker (1980). They argued that because housewives felt threatened by the women's movement of the mid 1970s, that in order to encourage them into education, programmes were designed that expanded their lifestyle rather than seeking to change it. Deem (1978) also called this into question about whether women did want to change their lives or preferred to remain as they were, as Deem suggests, out of fear of the alternative.

Delamont (1996) and Simms (1996) both argue that whilst women still do the lion's share of housework and caring, there can be no equality in education, and this can be a source of low self esteem in women. Clouder's work (1997) looked at the coping strategies of a group of women in higher education and found that some tried to balance both roles by being very organised in their university work so that it did not disrupt the

family too much. Some studied when their children were in bed; others enlisted family members, usually daughters, to help with the chores. None in the study thought to approach the institutions where they were studying to try and renegotiate times, seminars and other matters. However, Pascall & Cox (1993) argue that education can be liberating rather than domesticating and that education can lead to a more fulfilling paid job or career. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that education is still seen as part of combined roles rather than a permanent escape from or sharing of the domestic role, just relegating it to a less dominant place in their lives.

This balance of studying and caring is precarious and often depends upon the support of a partner. Relationships do break up when a woman returns to study, and some men are actively hostile to the partner's participation in education, accusing the women of neglect, rather than supporting them in their studies. Men can feel threatened when partners develop intellectual growth they do not share (Hayes, 1997). Women's burgeoning sense of self gives them more confidence to progress in education perhaps as an act of resistance to take more control over their own lives. Men's rejoinder can be to belittle their partner's attempt at education. One of Tittle and Denker's interviewees is married to a student who is allowed to work at home from 9am until 6pm, and she has to prevent the children disturbing him. She is also a full time student but still has full responsibility for the children and the housework:

> *He did help with the housework in a small way in the*
> *first semester, then nothing. So I don't really get to*

concentrate on my homework and my studies as well as my husband does. But my studies are important for me, too (Tittle & Denker, 1980, p139).

Male partners as in the example above play a gate-keeping role in controlling a woman's participation in education, for they can insidiously devalue it in this way, yet be seen to be supportive from the outside. Relationships often falter or are dissolved completely when women are forced to make choices. Although a break-up could be caused by educational participation alone, some women turn to education because a relationship is already problematic (Hayes, 1997). Wray (1996) carried out an investigation to assess the needs of mature students in higher education and found that of fourteen students who were in co-habiting relationships, eleven of them reported problems caused by their entry into university. One of the reasons for this has already been discussed, that women try to take on the educational role in addition to other domestic duties and the stresses and strains may cause disagreements. One of her students interviewed says her relationship ended when her husband physically beat her to prevent her re-registering. The second reason Wray suggests is that education enables women to develop in such a way that they can critically question their position in society and within a partnership. This personal growth and change can be seen by the other partner as threatening and selfish. Other women use education as a way to make a new life for themselves after relationships have already broken down, often finding themselves the sole breadwinner in the family. Although women may celebrate the fact that they are now free of their partners, they may also feel emotionally fragile

and have to learn to cope with the relatively strange environment of higher education on their own.

Many adult students suffer financial hardship whilst studying and it can, at times, be severe (Pearce, 1990; McGivney, 1990). Grant and benefit changes, and the advent of tuition fees in recent years have hit mature students harshly, along with the costs of travel and childcare fees which were probably not so much an issue when attending the local college. Research by Merrill and McKie (1998) showed that all the women they interviewed felt that they and their families had to make sacrifices such as no social life, holidays or outings so that they could study. The husband of one of their respondents became unemployed whilst she was at university and she had to take on a part time job. She suffered complete physical and mental breakdown towards the end of her degree:

> *I knew it would be a struggle, but I didn't realise how much of a struggle. With four children life became very difficult… we are so much in debt from the last three years, I don't know when we are going to surface, which is probably why I wouldn't do it again* (Merrill & McKie, 1998, p 6).

Other students who had to work part time to make ends meet also commented on how this was adversely affecting their studies. Merrill & McKie deduce that higher education will not be a viable option for many prospective students unless the economic climate changes in their favour. They find it difficult to be optimistic about suggestions for widening participation for women and other disadvantaged groups (Kennedy, 1997)

if the problem of finance is not addressed within higher education institutions with more practical help and advice. This view is even more pertinent today with tuition fees and greater emphasis on loans rather than grants.

2.17: Dispositional constraints

The third challenge facing mature students as suggested by Harris & Brooks' analysis (1998) is dispositional; how women feel about themselves as learners, their self esteem and sometimes their guilt. This latter psychological barrier is one the women find the most difficult to break (see for example, Tittle & Denker, 1908; Simms, 1996; Hayes, 1997). The guilt is not just about depriving their families of money, but of their physical presence and attention. One student in Tittle & Denkers' study had to force herself to ignore her children so that she could study:

> *I just tune 'em out, and I just tell them I'm studying, and I don't say any more, I just ignore them, and that seems to work, but they get very annoyed with me and they don't like me to go to the school, especially at nights. They like me home at nights. And I feel guilty (p 26).*

Another student from the same study felt guilty because she did not need to study as her husband's income meant that she could stay at home and look after the family, yet she did not want to. She felt guilty about not feeling guilty.

For many women, possibly including the example given directly above, university is seen as a positive experience in

which they come to feel valued and competent in their own right, and these feelings can outweigh or even suppress the feelings of guilt however much they are present in their lives. Higher education may initially be seen as a route to a new career, but can become a liberating experience along the way. Returning to study at a high level has allowed them to make meaning of their lives, re-evaluating it and making connections with the past that had not been made before (Lea & West, 1995). Life experience that may have felt a burden at the time takes on new meaning and becomes part of the learning process, moving the women forward emotionally as well as intellectually. This has a positive effect upon their self-esteem. Simms (1996) comments that education allows women to break down barriers that oppress them, those oppressions that kept their self-esteem low, having been conditioned and socialised throughout their lives to see themselves as second class citizens compared to men.

Once women take the first steps into education, they often reflect that they are enjoying doing something for themselves, and not just to please others. They can now have a sense of being valued outside the family, and not as someone's wife, mother or daughter. There is a renewed sense of competence, where priorities begin to change:

> *The big difference that I've noticed in myself so far is that my self-esteem has really taken a big jump. I do feel a lot more capable. I just think my values have changed a lot* (Tittle & Denker, 1980, p 129).

The above section on mature women in higher education has been a review of other research studies which will inform my

own work. As my study will be longitudinal, which these are not, I will be able to return to some of the earlier data and ask more pertinent questions over time. This will be discussed in the following chapters. However, much of the research, including my own, shows that when women first choose to study at university, they often opt for a limited range of subjects. The next section will discuss the gendered nature of different disciplines and the impact this has on how that discipline is viewed socially.

2.18: Subject choice

The choice of subject in higher education often compounds the gender divide and masculine notions. Although there is evidence to suggest that subjects are gendered, the choices made are not necessarily because of socially assigned and accepted roles. Rather, that women make a rational choice based on their ability to take advantage of opportunities and in recognition of the limitations of the subject in terms of career choices after university. Therefore, their choices are more socially constrained rather than socially determined. Nevertheless, there are certain taken for granted assumptions that need to be explored, and which influence choice. These assumptions are rarely challenged.

One assumption is that some subjects are more difficult than others at whatever levels they are studied. In fact Fitz-Gibbon & Vincent's work at Durham (1997) set out to show that, for example, physics, a typical male subject choice, is more difficult than psychology, a growing subject choice for women. Whether this is a valid argument or not, in terms of the binary divide, it does lead to a second assumption that

science is therefore more important than the humanities and social sciences. Yet, as Thomas (1990) points out, more government money is given to the sciences than the humanities, but not much of this money is used to help social welfare. Within the sciences, physics and chemistry (male) are considered more difficult and more important than biology (female).

Even within subjects 'naturally' considered female, the hierarchy within the subject is gendered. In education, in the early 1990s in Great Britain, 81% of full time teachers and 25% of heads in primary schools were female, and in secondary schools, 48% of full time teachers and 20% of heads were female, showing that women were not acceding to the higher ranks of the profession. For part time teachers, the proportions rise to 90% of primary teachers and 79% of secondary teachers being female (Acker, 1994, p 75). In higher education, only 22% of full time academics in British universities are female (Acker, 1994, p 135). By subject analysis, 32% of academics in the humanities and 7% in mathematics and science are female. Acker also found, from her own experience of wishing to take a masters degree before returning to teaching that:

> *My original ambition was completely outside the department's preferences and snobberies, into which I was gradually inducted: greater prestige derived from theorising about education systems and abstract schools than from going into real ones; it was better to write about higher education than lower education; above all, it was better to do a doctorate and enter*

> *academic life than to stop with the delightfully dubbed*
> *'terminal masters'* (p 13).

This value given to different subjects and to the worth within them is reflected in the way we make sense of our language. Each word is defined by what it is not, in its opposite, so, for example we cannot have an understanding of male without an understanding of female, thus opposites are what give language its meaning. Within these dichotomies, one is usually and implicitly given more importance than the other, with different values, positive and negative. Hence, by this thinking, male is better than female; science is better than humanities, young is better than mature. This can also be seen as considering the positive as the norm, often reflected in language such as 'lady bus driver' or 'lady doctor', where the male bus driver does not need a gender label as it is the norm, but the abnormal or different 'lady bus driver' needs explaining and labelling.

Many subject choices at university have certain qualities that appeal to assumptions of masculinity and femininity, and choices are often influenced by compulsory schooling and the influences brought to bear on them there. As discussed above, many older textbooks show women portrayed in low status caring roles and occupations such as nursing, teaching and home-making, whilst boys are portrayed in more serious manly roles requiring decision making and strength. We have come a long way since the *Janet and John* reading books, but many of the women in my study, including myself, were subjected to these books and influences. Children's television programmes reinforced these stereotypes, with the Blue Peter presenters, for example. It would be unthinkable to ever

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imagine Valerie Singleton jumping out of an aeroplane. This is not to say that women were completely brainwashed, but there was no discourse or ways to express or name this subjugation.

Nevertheless, academic subjects are not neutral and each has its own way of seeing the world and understanding it. Thomas' work on gender and subject choice (1990) shows that males in her study considered physics an exact science, requiring objectivity and an ability to prove theories rather than test them. Females, on the other hand, favoured subjects where they could interpret facts and data and come up with a subjective interpretation, and argue with others without coming up with a group conclusion or consensus. This may help to explain why women are attracted to subjects such as sociology, English and women's studies, where the analytical tools allow them to understand their own place in the world and to intellectualise their own experience within a socially constructed patriarchal society. Many of the mature women in this study first came across these subjects on their Access courses and this has encouraged them to see themselves in a more positive light and to pursue the subjects further. For some, this was their first experience of feminism, as the interview data analysed in chapter 5 reveals.

A recent trend to encourage more women to enter the usual masculine subjects and equalise numbers would not be an answer to equalising perception of the subject. If a feminine subject needed to attract males, for example, I would speculate that the terminology would have to change to allow that subject to become masculinised, and more worthy. If domestic science wanted to encourage men, for example, it

would need to be renamed as something akin to 'chef studies' or 'food technology' to appeal. This has indeed become the case and the subject has now evolved from domestic science, to home economics to food technology. The decision to encourage more women into masculine areas tends to be economically driven, rather than a move to equalise the balance. As there is currently a dearth of mathematics teachers in schools, more women are thus being encouraged to take mathematics, in order to teach the subject. Equality of opportunity does not necessarily mean equality of value. Liberal feminists have worked hard to remove the barriers of access for women into male dominated subjects, but this does not include the impact of patriarchal assumptions within those subjects, and until equality of value is achieved across all subjects, then there will still be no parity of esteem for women (Thomas, 1990).

In the last five years, women in positions of power have been speaking out on the subject. Carol Black, president of the Royal College of Physicians commented that when more women joined a profession, the status of that profession, along with pay levels, worsens. 60% of all new doctors are women, and tend to be attracted towards the low prestige areas such as palliative medicine and geriatric care, possibly because these areas do not require long hours of work (Sunday Times, August 2004). Women would be less likely to take more demanding roles or the top jobs such as professors because of the difficulties of combining them with family life. In response, Dr Maureen Baker, of the Royal College of GPs, said:

If a higher ratio of men or women working within a profession is deemed to be reducing its status then there is a problem with the very way society views the ability of the sexes (BBC News, 2004).

Studies looking at one gender entering a profession usually associated with the other, where gender norms are broken, tend to be on men entering predominantly female professions, for example, men in primary school teaching or men into nursing, therefore male privilege still operates where being male is the critical signifier of professional authority (Kleinman, 2008). Williams' study (1995) of men in primary school teaching found they stated that their minority position lifted their status and that they experienced 'a ride in the glass elevator' (p37). Another example of the male being the critical signifier of authority rather than professional status can be seen in West's (1992) observations of doctor patient interaction. She found that male doctors interrupted patients more than patients interrupted them, whereas when the doctor was female, she found the reverse.

Thus, it seems that there is a hierarchy of value of professions, with the more male dominated professions being valued more than those dominated by women, and where the trend starts to reverse, with more women entering a profession, its value is perceived to decrease. This may have implications for the professional choices that the women in my study make when leaving university, presuming they complete their course. Some have already made their choices by choosing the PGCE course, with a view to teaching afterwards.

It can be seen from this chapter that the massification of higher education is not just about increasing access, but is also about questioning the purpose of higher education. With the increase in student numbers, teaching and learning styles have had to be changed and this has had repercussions on the way particular groups are catered for within the higher education communities. Mature women have diverse reasons for attending university and have diverse needs as learners. For many women, higher education is an opportunity to engage in education at a higher intellectual level that they may have thought possible or attainable. Yet there are still physical and sociological barriers that prevent their complete fulfilment as equal members of society.

2.19: Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to review the literature and research studies in the areas of gender and higher education in order to identify themes which may be important for the women in my study. Firstly, the background to the gendered schooling and socialising of girls and women to be feminine was examined, showing that pressures came from families, schools and career advice to follow a route of caring work thought most suitable for women, often with the expectation that women would automatically get married and have families. This would be their career aspiration. Although this is a generalisation, and there are exceptions, the society in which this research takes place is deeply influential in making this the accepted norm for women in the time period of this literature review.

Secondly, the developments in education that affect higher education have been examined, looking back at what and who universities were originally for, and how this has influenced their nature of gendered development. The literature review concentrated on two main developments that affected the numbers of people, both male and female, who were given access to university, namely the Robbins Report (1963) and the Dearing Report (1997). Both increased access numerically, for different reasons. Within this discussion, the position of mature women was explored, and how there has been more opportunity for women to access higher education. Within this discussion, the literature has been reviewed to see what constraints operate on the women who decide to enter higher education after a break from education. Finally, the issue of subject choice has been analysed, showing that many women still enter higher education with aspirations for caring professions, and how those professions are valued within the wider society.

As this chapter reveals, higher education is becoming increasingly linked to the economy, which raises questions as to whether one of, or indeed the sole purposes of tertiary education is to provide a skilled workforce. The next chapter will examine recent debates as to what that role may be in terms of skills development as part of a course in higher education, and the implications for mature women students. As the women in my study will be following courses in which key skills are embedded, the discussion will begin with the literature on key skills and then move on to skills more generally, and how such skills are defined and valued within the educational and wider communities.

Chapter 3: Skills, Education and Employment

3.0: Introduction

This chapter provides a further contribution to setting the context for the research and explores the literature on how the skills agenda has become more and more explicit within the world of higher education, and the way in which higher education has been drawn into a wider employability debate, most particularly through the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Because the participants in this study will be involved in key skills initiatives within the university which I am studying, the development of key skills is a relevant contextual issue.

There follows a discussion of how key skills can fit into higher education, including problems of integration and assessment. The literature is further explored to ascertain whether skills are gender related, and if so, what the implications for women in higher education are. The research project, *Embedding Key Skills within a Traditional University* (Chapple & Tolley, 2000) in which the women were participating is then discussed in some detail, followed by an evaluation of the potential impact of this on their studies. The period within which the research takes place was one of keen interest in key skills development and many universities were considering the implications of key skills on their programmes and curricula.

3.1: Introduction to Key Skills

The concept of key skills began to permeate educational policy in the mid 1990s, initially focusing on post-16

education and training in response to continued criticism of the narrowness of A-Levels and the lack of participation in 16-19 education and training (Macintosh, 1996; The Guardian, 18 December, 1995). In this chapter I will explore this concept of key skills and how it has developed over the past twenty years or so in response to the changing needs of the global market and the changes in education. From small beginnings, key skills developed into mainstream qualifications embracing much more than the 16-19 age group initially envisaged and were eventually developed across a number of levels and sectors to include higher education. This had important implications for the participants in my study. The chapter will focus in particular on attempts to integrate key skills into higher education, and the difficulties therein, with particular emphasis on mature women students. There will also be a section evaluating the aforementioned project in relation to mature students.

3.2: Background

There were many ideas at the early stage of development as to what transferable skills are, or should be, and also by what name to call these skills. This discussion will be analysed below. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) developed six key skills units at five levels in 1998, based on the NVQ format and piloted three of these units at Level 3 in the 16-19 year old sector with a view to making them mandatory in 2000. This development and its implications will be explained in more detail in the section 3.3 on 'what are key skills'? There has been, and continues to be an international debate on skills and much work has been done in Australia, for example (Prickett, 1994; Candy, 1994).

However, for the purposes of this thesis, I have contained my analysis to England in which country the research is situated.

The government of the day in 1989 set up Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) in the university sector in order to foster closer links between higher education and industry and offered support to those institutions willing to examine their learning and teaching practices to include the development of transferable skills (Tariq & Cochrane, 2003; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Prickett, 1994). Against this backcloth of continued pressure, in higher education, there was much resistance to the prescriptive nature of these units, and whilst most higher education institutions acknowledged that some form of skills should be made explicit in the intended outcomes of their courses, they preferred to develop their own models and levels where appropriate (Tariq & Cochrane, 2003). Commentators on higher education such as Rowland (2001) suggested that there is too much emphasis placed on skills, which could possibly undermine the critical purpose of academic work, although he accepts that the acquisition of skills is important, it should not be seen in isolation. This links to the argument of how, and even if key skills should be assessed and whether these skills should be embedded within the curriculum or offered as a separate qualification. This will be further discussed below.

Many universities, particularly the post 1992 universities, were in the forefront of developing their own university wide key skills programmes, and putting networks in place to share and disseminate this information in a variety of ways through conferences, shared research and development projects and through the internet. The Salford Key Skills Project (Salford,

1998), for example, as well as embedding key skills in their programmes, sought to identify any gaps in provision and to encourage students to seek evidence from activities outside their programme areas; De Montfort University (De Montfort University, 1997) set up an initial assessment of key skills on entry and through guidance and support mechanisms, students would exit with a record of achievement of their skills. Other pre-92 universities also took part in key skills initiatives, such as York (University of York, 1998), which established its own credit bearing York Award, and Manchester (Coe, 1998), which included using records of achievement as part of its wider emphasis on student support. A different approach was taken by Queen's University, Belfast, where a university wide team designed a skills auditing and mapping tool to enable teachers to identify what skills were already in their courses and to see where the gaps lay (Tariq *et al*, 2004). The tool would then enable the university to support its policy that students should have access to develop all the skills as specified in the university's prospectus. A key skills development pack and website was produced by the University of Nottingham (Murphy *et al,* 1997) which included advice on how to establish key skills within institutions and also presented a number of case studies of successful provision. So we can see from those examples given, how great the disparity of key skills initiatives in higher education was which was government funded in order to encourage the provision.

The project that the participants in my study will be taking part in is one such research undertaking, where eight departments of a traditional university were funded by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to

embed key skills in their curricula and to disseminate the information from the evaluation through the university.

During the research for this specific project, I have not come across any literature looking specifically at mature students and key skills. It is acknowledged that mature students bring with them to education a wide variety of skills, formal, informal and perhaps even learnt subconsciously, from previous employment, bringing up families and dealing with the world in general (for example, Jackson, 2003). These are often considered the 'softer' skills, and also seem to be the ones that employers seek. The aforementioned pilot was concentrating on the more 'hard' skills, including numeracy and information technology (IT) skills, yet this does not accord with what Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) stressed was the most important skill, 'learning how to learn'. This took place in the midst of a controversy over what higher education is for, whether it is to provide a rounded education or to provide a multi skilled workforce, as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. This is an issue that will be analysed further later in this thesis.

3.3: What are Key Skills?

This section will give a brief background of the history of key skills, how they developed from being vocational in focus to become much broader and eventually a qualification in their own right.

Key skills are those skills considered to be transferable within an employment and educational setting (for example, see Brown, 1997; Oates, 1991; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995;

Murphy & Wilmut, 1998; Griffiths, 2001). There seems to be widespread support for the idea that these skills are important, yet wide differences of opinion exist concerning the issue of what they actually are and how they are to be defined. The most recent impetus for the current debate comes from Lord Dearing in his reports (1996; 1997) which specifically mention key skills. In his review of 16-19 education, the idea of a one year AS level qualification in three key skills was mooted, (Dearing, 1996, p18) but this has since been rejected. The review posited that schools should take the responsibility for developing and administering these skills along with teaching their own subjects. Prior to Dearing's coinage of the phrase 'key skills', the concept of transferable skills has been discussed since the late 1970s (see for example, Hyland & Johnson, 1998) when it became apparent that globalisation was changing the labour market. It was moving from what was often expected to be a job for life to a much more flexible, mobile and multi skilled workforce whose members would have to be able to manage change and take control of their own learning (Tariq & Cochrane, 2002). Globalisation is the concept of a shared social space:

> *The widening, deepening and speeding up of world interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life – a widespread perception that the world is rapidly being moulded into a shared social space by economic and technological forces* (Gourley, 2003, p. 125).

Gourley goes on to argue that people cannot be viewed simply as students, employees or even people with short term goals, but that everyone needs to be equipped with the skills

and abilities to master change, and to cope with an uncertain future. The skills necessary for all workers to be able to cope with this change have been called various terms including common, basic, transferable, core and key skills, and were initially vocational in context (Oates, 1996; Macintosh, 1998).

During the 1980s, vocational qualifications were modernised and standardised in order to meet the needs of industry, and in 1986 became the competency based units known as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). By 1988, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were developed which combined both the vocational element with a more general education. These were conceived as a stepping stone into higher education as well as employment and included units of key skills within them. The purposes of qualifications were often very different and it is often difficult to define their equivalence but one NVQ Level 3 is usually equated with one A-Level (Spours & Young, 1997).

During the early 1990s, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ)[7] developed national standards for key skills on the basis of NVQs, with elements, performance criteria and range statements, originally in six areas and at five levels.

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[7] In 1997, NCVQ merged with the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) to become the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA).

The areas were:

• Communication

• Application of Number

• Information Technology (IT)

• Working with Others

• Improving your Own Learning and Performance

• Problem Solving

The first three were further revised and simplified for a pilot that took place in 1997-9 in the 16-19 sector, in colleges, schools and with employers, with a view to becoming mandatory in this sector from September 2000. The evaluation report, to which I was a contributor (CDELL, 1999) shows that the occupational sector found it easier to embed the key skills than the educational sector. The importance of this will become apparent when the embedding project in higher education is discussed later in this chapter.

Subsequent to the pilot, a Key Skills Qualification was developed and was included in the Curriculum 2000 reforms, within which overall changes, the new A-Level specifications contained indicators of the key skills that might be achievable through that particular subject (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004; Murphy, 2001). The latter three skills were considered too difficult to assess in their current form so were not piloted, and further development work was taking place during the time of the pilot of the first three. The implications of this for mature students will become apparent in the discussion below on 'hard' and 'soft' skills, and the value given to them by various groups in society.

Before moving on to discuss key skills and higher education, I would like to comment on the way that the six key skills chosen for accreditation could be seen as too narrow for those who wish to proceed to higher education, that the first three, the 'hard' skills are not always seen as necessary in particular subjects, which will become apparent when the PGCE students discuss their ideas of the skills they need and value, so the Key Skills Qualification is not relevant for these students. Other commentators have suggested that the six skills chosen are fairly random, and as will be shown later, there are many different ways of articulating the skills which could be more inclusive to a wider range of people. Young, (2001) for example, suggests alternative skills which include foreign language acquisition, economic understanding, multicultural awareness and critical thinking which he argues are more appropriate for higher education, and less instrumental on the prevailing emphasis on particular employment needs and labour market conditions (Fieldhouse, 1998). These skills would definitely be suited to the participants in my study; many of these skills they will have developed through their lifecourse.

So far, the emphasis on key skills has been for a better skilled work force, particularly key skills within vocational qualifications. However, commentators such as Green (1997) and Hodgson & Spours (1997) argued that key skills should not just concentrate on personal and interpersonal skills for the workforce, but that they should be used to broaden education generally. Green was discussing 16-19 education, and the reform of A-levels, but this obviously has implications for higher education. He stressed the importance of skills

such as verbal articulacy, logical skills and mathematical literacy that he felt could be used as a basis for active citizenship. Rather than assess the key skills discretely, he proposed a core curriculum over all pathways. In order to achieve this, a fact acknowledged by Green, would mean an increase in teaching time at the 16-19 stage to almost double the contact hours students received[8]. This then, would decrease the hours students used for personal study and research, which is particularly important for A-level and vocational study; managing this is a skill in itself in preparation for employment or higher education. It would also disenfranchise mature students whose school education took place a number of years previously.

The Key Skills Qualification was never as successful as expected, and there is no mono-causal explanation for this. The many explanations that have been given for the lack of take up include the assessment by portfolio and test which was considered burdensome (Young, 2001); the lack of expertise of teachers to provide key skills opportunities and lack of enthusiasm from teachers 'rubbing off' on their pupils (Green, 1998; Mathieson, 1991; Kelly, 2001); the expectations of commensurate levels of key skills and their programmes of study (Kelly *et al,* 2001); no inducement of UCAS points, particularly for those already aspiring to enter university; and the general bad press that the Key Skills Qualification gained over the first few years (The Guardian, 2001; Bennett, Dunne & Carre, 1999; Hodgson & Spours,

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[8] These ideas were further developed following the Tomlinson Report (2004) recommending a diploma system for 14-19 year olds. The first ten diplomas began in September 2009. They are not a replacement for the GCSE and A-Level system but run alongside it as an alternative pathway to higher education.

2002; Hayward & Fernandez, 2004). Many of these commentators saw key skills in terms of being onerous rather than as an enrichment of the curriculum which, in turn led to a confusion of purpose and tension between vocational and academic pathways. From their research at Queen's University, Belfast, Tariq & Cochrane (2003) reflected that many staff still held the idea that university is not there to iron out the deficiencies of the secondary school system, nor is it there to provide 'work-ready' graduates (see also Atkins, 1999).

However, the issue of generic skills remains an important one. The following section will discuss this aspect in higher education, and show how the attempts to introduce key skills into higher education led to the development of a number of research projects and the discussion of generic skills development became more pronounced. This will be important for the participants in this study as they will be taking part in a skills development project, but will probably have no experience of key skills as will the younger students. Nevertheless, it may have the opposite effect in that they will be approaching key skills from a fresh background, whereas the younger students may bring with them the negative attitudes discussed above.

3.4: Key skills in higher education

Whilst it can be argued that a university education has always implicitly included skills development to some extent, the concept of key skills in higher education was emphasized and foregrounded in Lord Dearing's influential report on higher education (NCIHE, 1997). Dearing's Recommendation 21

suggested that higher education institutions should develop their programmes making explicit the intended outcomes in terms of skills so that students and employers could identify what was being offered. It thus sharpened the focus on employability, most particularly in the undergraduate curriculum, and was supposed to help individuals cope with change whilst maintaining the values already implicit in their education:

> *We recommend that institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop, for each programme they offer, a "programme specification" which identifies potential stopping off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:*
>
> *• The knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;*
>
> *• **Key Skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;** [my emphasis]*
>
> *• Cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;*
>
> *• Subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills.*
> (Executive summary, NCIHE, July 1997).

University education has always been linked to the needs of the labour market, whether explicit or implicit, and with the expansion of higher education in recent years, as outlined in the previous chapter, graduates needed to reflect upon the

changing requirements and structural changes of the current labour market (Atkins, 1999; Young, 2001). Under these conditions, fewer would become academics, so there would be more competition in the labour market with an increase in the pool of graduates seeking work. Graduates, in common with all other employees, will need to take responsibility for their own learning, career and personal development. Their 'knowledge' quickly goes out of date, so they need skills to allow them to continually update their knowledge. When there were fewer graduates, they were 'cherry-picked' by large companies who had the structures and finances for their continued professional development (CPD). However, because there were more graduates due to the expansion of higher education, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), for example, were taking advantage of the situation and are hiring them, yet did not always have the resources to allow their employees to continue their professional development and update their skills (Higher Education and Employment Briefing Paper, 1997). So we can see that recent graduates would be looking for more non-graduate jobs, thus reducing the pool of jobs for those groups more marginalized by society, as the competition will be greater. Mature women graduates would likely be one of these marginalized groups. As Tariq & Cochrane point out:

> *Unfortunately, the often-repeated assertion that 'Graduates on average earn much more than those without degrees and are far more likely to be in employment' (DfES 2003) is unlikely to hold any validity as increasing numbers of graduates already ensure that many are destined to enter low-skilled, routine and insecure jobs* (Tariq & Cochrane, 2003, p 486).

Employers were beginning to state what they required of graduates apart from their subject specific skills (See for example, CBI 'Key Skills and Higher Education Survey', 1998). A degree could no longer be perceived as a passport to a highly paid executive job, so candidates must now be able to demonstrate other skills and abilities. These skills vary, but have been articulated in recruitment, for example, of those who have leadership qualities, social skills, and problem solving skills. Two job advertisements on the University of Southampton website (www.soton.ac.uk) for graduates spelt this out:

> *We want people who are not just good academically,*
> *but who have good social skills and are well organised.*
> (Glaxo Wellcome, University of Southampton, 1995).

> *We will expect you to demonstrate: initiative,*
> *leadership, thinking and problem solving skills,*
> *communication skills, ability to work with others,*
> *creativity and innovation, priority setting.*
> (Proctor and Gamble, Recruitment brochure, 1996).

In 1998, the Institute for Employment Studies published a report on employers' perceptions of Key Skills (Dench, Perryman & Giles, 1998), and whilst many were aware of the Key Skills Qualification, the skills rated the most important in their large survey were:

- Working in a team, learning and oral communication - rated highly as 'very important'

- Written communication and the use of numbers - reported as being 'important'

- Business awareness and IT - rated the lowest as 'not very important'

In light of the emphasis on the three skills in the QCA Key Skills Qualification, this is surprising as they only appear as 'important' and 'not very important' whereas the softer skills not given authority in the qualification were put as 'very important'. Communication is split, but oral communication that is in the first category of 'very important' is not assessed in the qualification end test, and therefore not given the weight of assessment.

A number of other studies have indicated employers' dissatisfaction with higher education to provide the type of graduates they need (Kemp & Seagrave, 1995; Tolley, 1991; Otter, 1992, Roizen & Jepson, 1985). A central concern is how institutes of higher education respond to the perceived requirements of industry, and to 'produce' graduates with the traditional intellectual capabilities and also flexibility for the world of work. One particular problem highlighted by the above studies is the disparity between the many skills required as expressed by the various employers and the different language used to describe them. This is exemplified by the two examples given above. Hesketh's study of over three hundred employers (1999) found that most employers were reasonably satisfied with graduates, but it very much

depended upon the employment sector as to the degree of satisfaction, and most had wanted their skills contextualised. Some companies such as Esso (Emery, 1999) asked instead for particular 'key characteristics' identified through interview and business games, and they then supported their graduate employees for up to five years with professional on-the-job training. These characteristics included the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, motivation, and a high level of knowledge, developed in an intellectually rigorous manner - a mix of specific and transferable skills.

This was the issue of this disparity that the skills agenda was attempting to address, to bridge the gap between what employers wanted in graduates, and what universities were providing. Most universities did not want to use the QCA Key Skills specifications, seeing them as too prescriptive and not particularly relevant to higher education, and possibly too narrow a focus to cope with the different kinds of post-16 learners. Many preferred to emphasise and make explicit certain skills which were already implicit in particular courses, and to find ways of integrating different approaches to learning without diluting the essence of the course. One successful example of this was the Ability Based Curriculum (ABC) coordinated by Sue Otter of the then DfEE which was a support network originally set up between eight universities as a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas. The name was used as an alternative to key skills as many felt that this term was associated with the QCA specifications which they found too prescriptive and not totally relevant to university education.

The model of good practice from whence the term ABC came can be seen in this extended example of Alverno College in Milwaukee. It was their description of eight key abilities they wanted to develop in all their students, and which they have been putting into practice since 1973. This college based its whole ethos on integrating these skills as part of learning an academic subject, continually assessing those skills in a specific skills centre. Students were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning from the outset, and were given many opportunities to practise and develop their skills in a variety of contexts (Otter, 1998). Alverno is an all female college, and part of the student induction was to write as essay, 'How women choose colleges', which demonstrated their writing skills and revealed much about themselves and their view on learning. The tutors could then provide the learners with the tools to analyse and understand their learning. This was done by small focused assessment experiences which shifted the learning from the tutor to the student, hopefully making it into a strong and powerful learning experience to build upon and fulfill the goal of becoming a lifelong learner (Loacker & Doherty, 1984). This approach of the reflective essay seems a powerful tool in helping mature women to articulate their thoughts and feelings towards higher education, and perhaps their hopes and fears, some of which may be alleviated through the tutorials. The advantages can be seen as two-fold: their tutors will have read their essays so will have an awareness of their concerns and will also have an idea of their academic ability so can support them accordingly.

Many institutions received funding from various agencies for development work in skills, and also the dissemination of that

work throughout higher education including the University of Nottingham working in conjunction with the Open University (1999). Other developmental work considered different aspects of key skills: how to embed them within the curriculum (University of Luton, 1998), whether additional opportunities should be given for students to extend their key skills beyond that offered within their course (Queen's University Belfast, 2003), at what level key skills should be required within a degree course (Nottingham Trent University, 1998), how they should be assessed (Napier University, 1998) and how higher education institutions could develop an institution wide policy (University of Nottingham, 1998). Much of this work is based around Personal Academic Records and similar portfolio work, (De Montfort University, 1997; University of Manchester, 1999; Loughborough University, 1998) where students were encouraged to reflect on their own strengths and areas for development and work out personal action plans with their tutors in order to progress, reflecting somewhat the Alverno model. One of the schools taking part in the embedding key skills project outlined in the following section, used this aspect of recording and developing skills, and has gone on to win awards for this work (PADSHE Newsletter,1997).

There is no question that higher education institutions are responsible for delivering academic excellence, but there were fears at the time that there was too much pressure to accommodate the market, industry or the ideology of the prevailing government. Those such as Young (2001) questioned how far employers should influence the skills agenda. Assiter (1995), however, took a more positive view, pointing out that as the culture within higher education had

arguably changed over the last thirty years from an elitist institution to one more accessible to greater numbers of people, then there would be a greater number of people who would be seeking employment outside of their subject discipline, and these people needed to develop more transferable skills. She dismissed the fear that industry shapes universities, and suggested that the new approaches to teaching and learning and assessment currently being developed could only enhance people's critical ability rather than threaten it. However, this argument could be taken a step further, in that the development of skills can enrich everyone's lives, whether they are young or old, looking for employment or studying for personal development. Duckett suggests that:

> *The transferable skills of communication, teamwork, problem-solving and learning to learn are fundamental to enrichment, empowerment, vitality and joy and are as significant for learning about ourselves and empowering us, as they are to the world of work* (Duckett, 1998, p 56).

The 'softer' skills as articulated here seem to be more easily transferable to everyday life and can help people, both young and mature to learn more about themselves and their world which can only help them to become more fully human and rounded beings, perhaps revealing prejudices in the world, and a more meaningful and critical outlook on life (Freire, 1972). However, some may argue that higher education is meant to provide that anyway, but I would argue that by making things explicit, it becomes more meaningful to learners.

Now that education has become a much more fragmented experience for learners (Macintosh, 1998) and is expected to take place over the life course, it is an important skill to be able to plan one's own learning, by reflecting on one's own strengths and weaknesses, to be able to prioritise, plan and manage one's time effectively, given that there are many other calls on one's time. The wider diversity of the student body meant that graduates could no longer be assumed to have certain skills taken for granted but must be able to demonstrate these skills in a wide variety of contexts. One such skill, as outlined by Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) as the most important, is 'learning how to learn'. It has been suggested that students who have no experience of these skills need to be taught and supported throughout their education in a way that is sensitive to their needs (DfEE, 1997). However, as well as fostering a love of learning, universities must also be able to foster independent learning in a more straightforward way than the *ad hoc* method used when the majority of students were young and full time, and must be sensitive to a number of different learning styles and experience brought by more diverse students, such as mature women.

This is particularly important for the participants in this thesis as most of the women have children and household responsibilities, and some intend to continue with part time work, so must be able to plan these responsibilities around their studies. Referring back to the Dearing Report on higher education, mature women students are defined as problematic. Report 5 on widening participation states that mature students on access courses tend to be women, which

has been seen in chapter 2. According to the report, the older, less qualified women face particular practical problems:

Additionally, these students often possess inadequate time-management skills as well as having less free time to manage (NCIHE, 1997, Report 5; 2.3).

As Anderson & Williams (2001) suggest, then, they are considered 'outsiders within', individuals moving into a space that has historically excluded them and they are now being expected to fit into the system rather than the system being changed to accommodate their needs.

3.5: Problems of integration

The QCA Key Skills units did not take easily to embedding in existing courses, primarily because they were originally developed to enable students to demonstrate their skills in a vocational setting in the GNVQs. For example, of the three key skills emphasised by Dearing (1997), Application of Number and IT are probably more difficult to embed in degrees such as arts and humanities, whereas Communication, may be more difficult in a scientific context (for example, see Kelly, 2001). The skills easiest to extrapolate from or integrate into courses are those which have not so far been given emphasis by the recent 16-19 pilot, namely Problem Solving; Working with Others and Improving own Learning and Performance. These skills, or variations of them, are those most often mentioned as desirable by employers and probably those most often implicit within many higher education courses.

If universities, and indeed, schools or departments within them, were integrating different skills into their courses, there might be a need to provide opportunities for the acquisition of additional skills outside of those courses. This could become more apparent as students chose modules from other departments, or changed universities, and amongst those who achieved their degree by credit accumulation over a number of years and institutions. In recent years, there has been a steady move to increase interdisciplinarity and cross faculty research and it might be hoped that it would eventually impact upon teaching. For example, the University of Nottingham has developed a cross-disciplinary research group (CDRG) which holds seminars and discussions to share theory and practice, and is used as a network for researchers across all disciplines (http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cdrg/?q=about). Although this is mainly for staff and post graduate researchers, it is open to others, and sets a precedent for other cross-disciplinary work. This could be considered empowering for students as they might desire customising their own degree in such a way as to include modules from such diverse disciplines as languages, culture, history, literature and science. However, this could ultimately lead to employers asking for customised degrees to fit in with their own particular needs, for example, a business course linked to IT and a particular language, which would put more pressure on universities to react to this need, to provide a skilled workforce. When key skills are fully integrated into programmes of education, then the language of competency and capability become part of the discourse of learning in higher education. As Bridges (2000) points out, this impacts

directly on the nature of knowledge and challenges the epistemological foundations underpinning what a higher education curriculum is.

3.6: Embedded or bolt on?

There has been much discussion about how key skills should be taught or developed. As discussed earlier in this chapter, there have been a number of initiatives that have taken a number of different approaches; fully embedded in the programme of study; as a separate bolt-on qualification or a mixture of the two, with the skills already mapped into the course highlighted, and the opportunity for further development of those 'missing' skills provided usually by a support tutor.

Originally, key skills were envisioned as being integrated into learning programmes. Secretary of State Kenneth Baker introduced this idea in a speech to the Association of Colleges of Further and Higher Education (ACFHE) in 1989, where he suggested a range of core skills that post-16 students needed to develop as a broadening of their education, fitting in with the Curriculum 2000 reforms. The list very much reflected Dearing's list (NCIHE, 1997) and also included 'personal relations' and 'familiarity with changing and social contexts'. He suggested that these skills had clearly defined levels and formal assessment procedures, yet:

> *I am not suggesting putting on separate courses to teach core skills; because they cannot be taught as a bolt-on extra* (cited Wolf, 1991 p 189).

Wolf suggests that his proposals had become common currency in key skills thinking, yet, for her, as an assessment expert, this should not have been taken for granted, but problematised and further research carried out before assuming that it was not just desirable, but possible to come up with robust assessment criteria, which she felt were not being discussed thoroughly at the time and could cause difficulties once the ideas were set in motion:

> *They do so in spite of encompassing unrecognized, major and irresolvable problems* (Wolf, 1991, p 190).

Baker's speech, although made to the ACFHE, which includes higher education, was mainly focused on the 16-19 sector, although it would have had implications for higher education. So Wolf is suggesting that when universities were encouraged to take on board the issues of skills development, the majority did so uncritically from the point of view of assessment, and went for the embedded model, as will be seen below.

However, in his paper on study skills, Wingate (2006) argues strongly for the embedded model, claiming that skills development cannot be separated from context or this may give the epistemological message that knowledge is just an external body of facts that can be accessed given the right skills. Her work shows that many students considered this type of separate course as remedial, and often those that most needed them, did not attend. This becomes apparent in my study where the tutor of the PGCE students stated that students did not like attending the extra study skills workshops put on to support their key skills development.

Wingate also argues that such bolt on approaches can indicate that the skills are only short term in value, yet:

> *To enable students to achieve the complex level of learning, an embedded approach with a long-term developmental perspective would also be desirable* (Wingate, 2006, p 465).

Other universities preferred to take a different approach in which they provided a generic skills module, which all undergraduate students were required to pass. Napier University had such a course, entitled 'ToolKit', which ran in the first semester and students were given opportunities to resubmit work until it achieved the required standard, stressing the importance of the module for their continued development. The emphasis was on reflection and the ability to transfer the skills gained into other settings. As already noted above, many students do not always see the relevance of such modules, so to give it credibility alongside other credit bearing modules, an examination was introduced as well as a portfolio of evidence for the overall assessment of the module. The examination itself was similarly generic, with students being asked to write an essay on two skills covered in the module and then to reflect on how these skills were developed (Tait & Godfrey, 1999). As reported in the first year's evaluation, some students on the module commented positively about being forced to think about how they approached learning, and that they were beginning to see how to transfer their skills across to other modules. However, the difficulties were that other students felt overwhelmed by this and were slow to take on the responsibility for their own learning.

Most universities, like the example above, offered generic skills courses aimed at all their students. King Alfred's University College, on the other hand, put on two additional courses specifically aimed at mature students, on essay writing and coping with exams (King Alfred's, 1998). These two courses were the only ones that were not open to all students, perhaps with a view to helping mature students overcome any inhibitions they might have had over study skills. Nevertheless, this may also have been seen negatively, as remedial only for mature students. Unfortunately, data were not available on the uptake of these courses.

Both embedding skills within the curricula and providing discrete modules are both time consuming, the former in the development of the modules, and the latter in the assessment of portfolios in particular. Whichever method is used, an awareness of the theory of learning is vital for all staff in order to address the heterogeneous nature of the student body, so they can enable the students to develop and sustain the variety of skills they will need for their courses in higher education and afterwards in becoming critical and reflective thinkers. Kemp & Seagraves' study (1995) found that lecturers on the same course were using differing criteria to assess report writing:

> *Our findings indicated that lecturers teaching on the same course might base their marking of written reports almost wholly on the knowledge-based content of the report with little or no regard to presentation or, at the other extreme, could award high marks on the*

> *basis of the presentation, despite the fact that the content was mediocre* (Kemp & Seagraves, 1995 p 319).

Their study found that skills could not be taken out of context because the students were using the skills in their everyday work and found it confusing having to cope with developing their skills separately, and many students indicated that they had not received additional help in developing these skills. The researchers suggested that instead of tinkering with existing courses and removing skills from their context, new courses should be developed with skills in the forefront, with content serving as a vehicle for developing and demonstrating skills and as an assessable element in its own right (Kemp & Seagraves, 1995). This was a rather radical suggestion, and as they themselves reflect, unlikely to happen in the near future.

Many students arrived at university having already acquired a particular skill through other means, notably mature students who may well have experience in the workplace and/or the home. Accreditation of prior learning (APL) could be used to validate skills attained in previous employment and even in the home, as suggested by Bourne whose ideas will be discussed more fully later in this chapter (1995*). Skills are acquired and developed throughout life, not just in educational settings, but in leisure pursuits, travel, home life, hobbies and interests, and perhaps universities should be looking to acknowledge these skills along with those attained in their courses, whether attained whilst studying or in previous experiences. The participants in my own particular study are all women over the age of 25 who have worked in

employment and the home, and this experiential aspect is most important to them, as will be explored in chapters 5 and 6.

3.7: Skills assessment

Students enter higher education with different levels of attainment in key skills, whether accredited as such or not, particularly given that there are so many different routes to higher education. This was made explicit in the work of Murphy *et al* (1997), a small scale study which revealed that only 18% of students in their sample of higher education students had Level 3 in the three key skills areas of Communication, Application of Number and IT; only 6% had it in all five key skills[9] and 16% had no key skills at level 3 at all. These students did not have any previous experience of key skills courses but the assessment devised was based upon five of the key skills from the QCA specifications cited in the previous section. Assessing in this way proved to be time consuming and expensive, but the conclusions showed that any key skills development in higher education would need to take into account the diversity of the student body and the different levels of competency, and provide support in order for them to develop if required.

In the various routes to higher education, key skills were given different degrees of importance. In GNVQs, key skills were made explicit and passing the Key Skills Qualification units was part of the overall qualification. In A-levels, there was no such specification, although it had been considered an

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[9] 'Problem solving' was not included here as the specifications were still being developed by the QCA

option when the 16-19 curriculum was being revised, but it did not eventually happen in what has become known as Curriculum 2000. After A-Levels and GNVQ, the third most common route to university is the one with which my study is most concerned - access courses - which do not specifically include key skills. However, communication development and study skills are part of the course even if they are not assessed and accredited as such. Anecdotal evidence from when I was teaching at a further education college during the mid-1990s highlights this. I was observing an access lesson as part of the peer assessment programme in the college and the students were giving presentations. I offered to provide evidence for them of 'giving presentations to an unfamiliar audience' for their portfolios and was told they were not doing key skills as they already had too much to do.

During the period of intense interest in key skills development, it was argued that if students arrived at university with different ideas of what key skills were and of their importance, they should perhaps be made more explicit, and assessed separately, rather than being embedded in the curriculum (Murphy, 1997; 2001). When the Key Skills Qualification went nationwide in 2000, it was thought that students would be arriving at university with portfolios which they would wish to continue and they would expect structures to enable them to develop their skills to a higher level and to have them formally acknowledged (Murphy, 2001; Tariq *et al*, 2004). Similarly, they may have completed National Records of Achievement or Progress Files, in which they had been encouraged to be reflective about their own learning and abilities.

The UCAS system was also expected to change so that applicants would have a section on the form for key skills or other nationally accepted accreditation of skills, which in fact happened in 2002. From 2002, UCAS points were awarded for the three main key skills at levels 2-4, and profiled so that candidates received achievement for each level. This was considered a positive move at the time, and it had been reported by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in November 2001, that UCAS expected that:

> *Well over half of the applicants to higher education for entry in 2002 are likely to have Key Skills achievement alongside their A level or vocational A level awards.*
> (cited Brockington, 2002, p 23).

Nevertheless, further research by UCAS (2005) analysed the 2004 entry offers and found that only 9.3% of post-92 universities and 0.5% of pre-1992 universities actually included the Key Skills Qualification in their offers. This reflected the value placed upon the qualification by institutes of higher education, and the difference between the two types of institutions in their approach to key skills.

The paradox here appears to be that the wider key skills were not allocated tariff points, thus the value of 'points', until 2007 entry, outside of the scope of this thesis. So, whilst many universities were taking part in key skills initiatives, they were not giving value to the key skills work that students were bringing with them, by asking for them as part of the students points profile, preferring the 'hard' subject specific qualifications, as demonstrated in A-Levels. Some universities, then, did not accept the Key Skills Qualifications

as equivalent to A levels or perhaps saw them as an extra rather than as part of the points score overall, exemplified by the UCAS research cited above. There was no compulsion to accept the Key Skills Qualification points as part of offers that institutions made. It is possible, nevertheless, that those candidates with the Key Skills Qualification may have been seen more favourably by admissions officers than those who did not, regardless of whether it was included in the final tariff.   Mature students, however, would be unlikely to have formal evidence of their skills unless they had taken part in specific skills based initiatives in further education colleges, for example. The implications of this for the participants in this study could be that they had a number of skills, particularly the 'soft' skills that employers say they want, that are not formally recognized in the UCAS tariff, so may be disadvantaged.

The culture of education is now more oriented towards accreditation (Fieldhouse, 1998). Years ago, people went to 'night school' either to work for a qualification or quite often to follow a hobby or interest. Because of the changes in funding of adult education and the growth in interest in credit accumulation, all courses are now certificated, even one day courses. If higher education adopts the concept of portfolio building and the accreditation of key skills, it would have to recognise the concept of learning which takes place outside the university context. This raises the issue of how to assess it and at what level, and leads to the discussion pertinent to this thesis, as to what are the implications of this for mature women with a plethora of skills which are not accredited or perhaps not even recognised. This will be explored in the

following section along with a discussion of what the term skill has come to mean in the skills agenda around this debate.

3.8: Mature women and skills

A variety of meanings has been attached to the word, 'skill', yet many would say there is some common understanding of skills, but defining precisely what the term means is problematic and may signify different things to different people, depending upon the context. Historically, the idea of a skilled person is a craftsman, who after serving a long apprenticeship in a specialized area would then be considered proficient, or skilled. This is often seen as a practical activity, based on particular techniques learned and honed over a period of time, such as a joiner making a chair (Hyland & Johnson, 1998; Dench, 1997; Pring, 2004). Today, these skills would probably be classed as technical skills, and highly specialized, but also contextualised. The joiner learns his or her skill through working with the raw materials of the trade, and the skill would not necessarily be transferable. However, as already discussed, the notion of a highly flexible and adaptable workforce needs different types of skills; those that are generic and thus transferable. There has been much discussion as to whether it is possible to have skills that are context free, and transferable to different situations. Hyland & Johnson (1998) argue that it is impossible, that as there is no clear definition or common agreement of what these skills are, so that:

> *Such generalized skill-talk is fatuous and redundant;*
> *general transferable skills which are domain-*

independent … can be shown – on both logical and empirical grounds – to be entirely illusory (p 164).

Another leading proponent against the idea of context-free skills is Holmes (1995; 1998) who similarly challenges what he calls the 'positivist stance' where skills can be identified in an objective way and related to performance in a variety of settings, yet questions whether this can be measurable – how does the transfer of skills take place, and who decided this? He argues that all skills must have social meaningfulness, and this would in turn impact upon the idea of 'graduateness', otherwise employers would be unable to differentiate between graduates and non-graduates in terms of their skills if they were non-contextualised. This calls into question issues of power and the different meanings employers give to their own ideas of this 'graduateness', particularly in the climate of the changing nature of the student body. Increasingly, there are more non-traditional students about to enter the graduate job market, and so employers have a different pool of graduates to choose from. Mature women students are often included as part of the non-traditional cohort, even though the traditional cohort of young under-21 students is now in the minority. Nevertheless, the essence of 'graduateness' will affect mature women and so they must also participate in the skills development agenda.

This leads to the issue of whether there can be a difference between skills and attributes. If we disregard the technical skills discussed above, then one way of making a distinction can be between personal skills, which can perhaps be learned or developed, and personal attributes or attitudes, which are intrinsic to a person (Dench, 1997). The boundary between

personal skills and attributes will never be precise, but personal skills can be classed as those that can be developed to varying levels, such as working with others, taking responsibility, and negotiation skills, very much relating to the wider key skills as developed by the QCA, but which were not part of the Key Skills Qualification. The more innate personal attributes are more difficult to define, and arguably cannot be taught. Such skills or attributes would be those such as honesty, reliability and adaptability. If these types of skills or attributes were to be taught and assessed, this could cross over with an inherent sense of personal failure if found wanting, that could not be decoupled from the sense of self. Thus, it is important to be specific about what is a skill and what is an attribute, and what exactly is being assessed and valued. This will have implications for my study as the participants seek their identity within higher education, which may be a fragmented and vulnerable self as they return to education after having had previous bad experiences. Self-esteem is very important in this situation.

Before moving on to the discussion of the value of 'hard' and 'soft' skills, it is useful to look back to the work of Ainley (1994) whose work on the role of the changing role of a university has been used in the previous chapter. He supports the views of the authors above, that the notion of transferable skills in higher education is linked to the power structures where some skills are valued above others, and are socially divisive, even though this is not voiced. This has implications for the mature women in my study, as his views tend to suggest the key skills are one more form of social and cultural reproduction:

> *To present attitudes and habits detached from their cultural context as technical abilities that can be acquired piecemeal in performance not only divorces them from the cultural context that gave them their original meaning but represents them as equally accessible to students whatever their class, cultural background, gender or race… For at rock bottom, the real personal and transferable skills required for preferential employment are those of white maleness and traditional middleclassness* (Ainley, 1994 pp 80-81)

Morley's work on quality assurance in higher education (2001) similarly suggests the political influence on which skills are valued above others, and that the employability and skills agenda reinforces patterns of inequality rather than challenge it. She argues that:

> *Employability is a decontextualised signifier in so far as it overlooks how social structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with labour market opportunities* (Morley, 2001, p 132).

The application of this argument will be apparent in the latter part of this thesis in the discussion on the employment destinations of the participants in this study. I would argue that even though personal attributes are not gender specific, they are often referred to as the 'softer' skills and generally associated with women. A number of studies have highlighted this. For example, in Bourne's study of adult returners to further education (1995), she identified skills specific to men and women, based on their leisure activities. According to her research, women tend to read and engage in social activities

and artistic endeavours, often considered the 'softer' skills, whilst men tend to take part in team sports, outdoor activities and computers. However, I would argue that there is no evidence to suggest this is pure choice, and is rather linked to gender socialization as discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons for this, 'hard' skills still tend to be associated with males and 'soft' skills as female. This impacts on employment and is illustrated below in an extended example of women as managers, where the value given to the different types of skills becomes apparent as gender-specific.

Although employers suggest that it is the 'soft' skills that they are looking for in their employees, there is still evidence of the perception that it is the 'hard' skills that are considered most important in employment, and will be illustrated by the following example. Perhaps the 'soft' skills that employers want are in addition to the 'hard' skills rather than instead of, and that the actual qualification is the starting point. There is a considerable body of work on the concept of the glass ceiling and why women do not succeed in achieving higher levels of promotion at work as much as men, as has been illustrated in the previous chapter. Much of this work relates to women managers, so I will use some of this literature to exemplify how there is still a deeply embedded cultural belief that the 'hard' skills which are valued are linked to ideas of masculinity.

Human capital theory is often applied to the fact that women are primarily oriented towards child rearing, and that they will invest less in training and education than men, and will therefore have fewer qualifications (Hayward & Fernandez,

2004). One of the most important factors to be consider here is who pays for the accumulation of skills, as there are individual as well as social benefits. It is generally accepted that the onus for developing general skills is on the individual, whereas the onus would be on an employer for the more specific skills, once a certain level of education has been achieved. Linked closely to this is the view that when women do the majority of household labour, they will look for employment that is less demanding and that would involve fewer hours, and possibly less responsibility, so will not be willing to invest in their own human capital as much as men who would arguably be in the workforce for longer, and in more continuous employment (Compton, 1996; Sinclair, 1991).

However, recent feminist analysis looks more to the gendered structure of work, the literature of which has been reviewed in the previous chapter. Wajcman takes a more psychological approach and suggests that:

> *Women are socialised into feminine patterns of behaviour which are ill-suited to the managerial role. They lack the self confidence, drive and competitiveness which are seen as key to effective performance as a manager* (1996 p 261).

She suggests that the 'taken for granted' ideas about what a manager is are symbolically aggressive, tough, a go-getter, one who works long hours and has had continuous full time employment, thus managerial competence is linked to males and marginalises women. A study by Frank (1988) of 202 undergraduate business students on their perceptions of

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women managers showed that in general, male students perceived women managers as less knowledgeable and possessing poorer managerial skills than males, but to have greater interpersonal skills. Female students expressed a preference for a male boss, yet:

> *Their descriptions of women managers were more positive regarding competency, but emphasised an inter-personal rather than a task orientation* (Frank, p 107).

The study concluded that perceptional stereotypes had remained unchanged from previous work they had reviewed from two decades earlier. Kemp (1994) also acknowledged this barrier based on similar stereotypes but added that there was still a stigma of women managing men, and that women managers could often be excluded from the social networks where some decision making takes place, such as in clubs and pubs. This research, then, demonstrates that even though the 'softer' skills are valued, they are not as highly valued as much as the 'hard' skills. This is also reflected in the UCAS tariff discussed earlier in this chapter where points were only given to the Key Skills Qualification, which consists of the (male) 'hard' skills which had a rigorous assessment procedure of both an examination and a portfolio of evidence. The other 'softer' key skills were only assessed by portfolio, which gives the message that a qualification having an external measurable and comparable assessment is of more value than one that is internally verified. James (2000) sums this up in his article on skills assessment, which also links back to the example given of the key skills initiative at Napier

University (Tait & Godfrey, 1999), where the generic skills module included an examination in order to give it credibility:

> *Students whose antennae are particularly fine tuned in this respect quickly interpret value through the mediation of the assessment regime. Assess it and it becomes important* (James, 2000 p 355).

This leads on to the discussion alluded to above, of the difference between 'hard' and 'soft' skills and the value given to them in the signals that the assessment example above sends out. The 'hard' skills of the QCA Key Skills Qualification, Communication, Application of Number and IT are those assessed by an external examination and are those skills usually considered technical or 'male'. The other three skills, Working with Others, Improving own Learning and Performance and Problem Solving are considered the 'softer' skills and are more associated with women. This may appear a generalisation, but can be considered a socially constructed regime of truth, where something is generally understood and rarely challenged, and becomes part of common sense understanding (Foucault, 1974). This again reflects the dualist notion of opposites having different value, which is discussed further in the following chapter, but suggests that one side of the binary is the more important, and the other is seen more negatively, so male: female is a binary in the context of this thesis in particular, and so hard: soft becomes another, with 'hard' taking on more importance, and having masculine connotations and value than 'soft' which is more feminine, and of lesser value.

Yet, the irony is that recently there has been a new desire in businesses valuing and actively seeking the softer skills, (Borghans, Green & Mayhew, 2001) but looking for them in males. Sukhoo *et al* (2006) explored the success of software design, an industry dominated by men, in meeting deadlines, keeping to budget, *et cetera,* when the skills they required included the softer skills as well as technical know-how, where when the designers only had the technical skills, they were less successful. Similarly, the study by Moss & Tilly, *Soft Skills and Race* (1996) explored employers' desire for their workers to have the soft skills, aimed at black men, who they felt were particularly lacking in them. Their definition of soft skills was:

> *Skills, attributes and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behaviour rather than formal or technical knowledge* (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p 267).

The software research cited above, also gave their definition:

> *Soft skills are often developed through experience of working with people, problem solving, listening, teamwork, interpersonal skills, verbal communication, multi-tasking and stress and conflict management* (Sukhoo *et al*, 2006[10]).

When this analysis is applied to mature women students, it shows that the wealth of experience of knowledge and skills they bring with them, may not necessarily be valued as much

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[10] This article was accessed at http://www.informingscience.org/proceedings/InSITE2005/I55f42Sukh.pdf where no page numbers were given.

as they hope and expect. This will become very important in chapter 5 when I explore with the women whether they felt their skills have been valued.

There have been particular projects which address the needs of mature women who are entering higher education in order to achieve employment, but based on combining academic study with work based learning. Ledbury & Makeson (1998) give evidence of two such initiatives. The first is between a tertiary college and a university, in an area which previously relied on coal mining for employment, so the impetus was to get people back into work, as well as provide them with an education. It received European funding as well as special funding for women, and applicants for the course needed no formal entry requirements. This course, Cultural Tourism Management:

> *Successfully combines Key Skills and academic study, and produces people who are work-ready, up-to-date and enthusiastic about returning to work* (Ledbury and Makeson, 1998 p 8).

Secondly, another project seemed to foster more generic skills, yet was similarly aimed at getting women back into work. At the University of North London, one of the modules in the English studies course offered students the chance to put their skills into practice, again in a work based situation, this time in publishing. The theory behind this was to respond to the changes in the student body which was predominantly female, mature and local (Joscelyne, 1995). This type of course, the organisers felt, offered women who did not fit the concept of the stereotypical graduate, a chance to use their

past experience in new situations whilst trying new skills in a real setting. Nevertheless, apart from the four PGCE students, the women in my study were not on specifically vocational courses, but these examples do illustrate that work was being done specifically to help women graduates re-enter the workplace in a meaningful way. Neither of these two projects was within a Russell Group university, but lessons can be learned from them as how best to value and build upon the skills mature women bring with them to higher education.

However, a number of women who are returning to learning in higher education may not always be looking towards employment as their primary goal, although this is often given as the main cause, of updating their skills for the workplace. As will be seen later, the reasons are complex and not mono-causal, and on deeper discussion, other reasons surfaced such as proving one's capabilities and taking up opportunities now available to them that were not possible when they left school. These reasons can often be gender related as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter. So, if women are not entering higher education with the main objective of becoming an effective economic member of society in order to reflect the cultural patterns of constantly changing society, there may be other reasons that need to be examined. Knowles (1980) famously explored the different reasons that adults want to learn, and problematised 'pedagogy' as relating purely to the teaching of children and that 'andragogy' was a more suitable approach to adult learning which focuses on the philosophy of learning that is based more on the individual. The objective of andragogy was to bring out the intellectual potential of the individual to the highest possible degree, and this would not fit in with the

cultural model espoused above. The needs and goals of these adult students may not necessarily reflect those of the prevailing government, or indeed the institution within which they study. This is also reflected in Maslow's ultimate hierarchy of need – self actualization (1943). Mature students return to education voluntarily and the learning experiences need to be meaningful to the individual (Knowles, 1980). This has implications for the women in my study who will be entering a conservative, gendered and classed university system which embraces lifelong learning and mature students, but still has the values of the prevailing employment market at its heart.

The consequences of this for mature students, as shown in Marks' study on vocationalism in higher education, (1999) is that those who do not fit the 'education for work model', the less career time they will have, so are more likely to be studying for more intrinsic benefits:

> *As such, mature students are clearly the 'marginalised majority' – politically and culturally disenfranchised within a system which despite sheer force of numbers appears to only barely tolerate their ongoing presence* (p 166).

However, one must take into account the fact that self-esteem may be a factor here, and some women may say they are not aiming for employment but just to fulfill an ambition or to have something to aim for, whereas employment is their main goal. Lack of self esteem and fear of failure may be why women do not feel able to see beyond the first hurdle. This is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

The differing reasons for universities embracing the skills agenda have been explored in the previous chapter, so I will now discuss below how one university has been attempting to foster key skills through a Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) funded research project and which the participants of this study were engaged in as students in their disciplines.

3.9: Review of departments taking part in the Embedding Key Skills project

Central University is one of a number of universities taking part in DfEE funded projects concerned with the development of key skills. Originally, 118 project outlines were submitted for funding, showing the growing interest in the development of key skills in higher education, and 28 were invited to submit full bids, of which nine were finally selected to receive funding. The post-92 universities, such as Sheffield Hallam, have been in the forefront of investigating key skills initiatives and implementing strategies within their teaching and learning to encompass and highlight skills within their programmes of study (Drew, 2000). The more traditional universities have perhaps been a little less enthusiastic about this type of development, so this present project enabled Central University as part of the Russell Group to address its current policy on the explicit development of skills within a traditional teaching and learning setting. The aim of the project was to establish ways in which key skills could be embedded within the curricula and how best they could be identified and assessed. This identification of good practice was to be disseminated throughout the institution with the

ultimate aim of developing an institutional policy on key skills. The work was intended to be based on existing skills development work within each School, such as the keeping of personal academic records, and also on the work of the key skills team in the School of Education whose members work in various areas of the development, dissemination, assessment and evaluation of key skills. This work included the preparation of a staff development pack, *Supporting Key Skills in Higher Education* (1997) which was used to support schools in the university which were taking part. The university ultimately developed a Key Skills On Line self help programme which could be accessed by all staff and students through the Information Services (IS) web pages, to understand and develop one's own key skills, and was based on the QCA guidelines for key skills.

Eight departments in the University volunteered to take part in the project, and their diversity ranged from vocational, such as nursing studies, to non-vocational such as English studies, and included both undergraduates and post graduates. The women who are taking part in my study are concentrated in three of these departments, English Studies, the School of Sociology and Social Policy and the School of Education Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course. These were chosen for a number of reasons, some of them pragmatic, which will be discussed as part of the methodology in the next chapter. I will examine in the following sections how each of the three departments implemented its key skills policies, and then raise a number of issues and questions regarding the embedding of key skills in general and how this might affect the way the departments evaluate their work. This critique will be based upon the

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literature reviewed in this chapter, and the issues raised about the development of key skills in higher education.

I was able to participate in the project as an observer at some of the project meetings and to hold informal discussions with some of the departmental representatives for the project. Some schools were more explicit than others to their students about their involvement in the research, so it is important to set the context for the participants of my study.

3.10: Department of English Studies

There has been much developmental work within this department on records of achievement which includes highlighting skills within programmes. This work is national, part of the Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education (PADSHE) project initially developed within this department by Angela Smallwood during 1996-2000. Work had also been done in conjunction with the Careers Advisory Service, which provided an extensive package on skills in the format of a self audit and ways to continually develop skills. There was a strong commitment in this department to key skills development in teaching and learning. All modules were defined with their intended outcomes in terms of skills where the emphasis was placed on the process of learning as well as the product.

This school was very explicit to students about the nature and importance of skills development in all the skills areas, but emphasis was placed on improving own learning as the skill identified as underpinning all the others. Development was seen as being student led, with the students being given

information on how to evaluate their own skills levels, what resources were available to them and what support and feedback they could expect from staff. One such example of change was the cover sheet for feedback on written work, which included a section on the use of relevant and appropriate skills. This ongoing self development was tracked through the records of achievements or Personal and Academic Records (PARs) by a written report by the student at the end of each module. (See Appendix I)

As part of the background to the project, recent graduates were contacted and asked their views on key skills and the department. One of the outcomes was that they would have liked the key skills made more explicit to them whilst not actually changing the course. They would also have liked other opportunities to develop skills outside of their academic department flagged up to them. This is what the department intended to do as part of the project, providing information to students as to where they could access support within and without the department. Current students in the first year of the project were also invited to comment on the initiatives and one of the participants to my study attended one of these. The students would only be assessed on their skills with a view to their progression the following year. Optional support would be offered to those students who, in consultation with their tutors, needed to build up the levels of competence required to progress.

Due to staff changes, the key skills initiative did not begin until the second semester, although students did start working on their PARs, which included the extensive key skills audit, which the careers service devised. However, it did

appear that the PARs work and the key skills work were being carried out relatively independently of each other and could possibly overlap and would therefore need to be coordinated in order to prevent duplication and possibly overkill regarding the emphasis on skills. As well as the university key skills profile student self assessment (Appendix II), there was a similar one designed for English studies (Appendix III).

3.11: School of Sociology and Social Policy

This school had recently reorganised its teaching and learning to a more skills based rather than content based first year module, common to all students. Their key skills project was based on this, the main focus of change being to make the key skills more explicit to learners and to broaden their range of skills. The actual skills being assessed were based on the five QCA skills (i.e. excluding problem solving), but under different headings which relate more to the subject area in question. As well as completing the skills audit common to all departments in the university, the students were also asked to assess themselves, in the same format, on the following skills, which have the equivalent QCA Key Skill on which they are based, in brackets:

- Information Technology (Information Technology)
- Research and Presentation (Communication)
- Quantitative Analysis (Application of Number)
- Collaborative Work & Participation (Working with Others)
- Strategies for Development (Improving own Learning and Performance)

As well as the key skills, students were expected to develop cognitive (methodologies and critical analysis) and subject specific skills, the latter being one of the suggestions of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Students were given an extensive handout on these skills in a lecture which explained the aims and objectives of the key skills work in general and also specific to each key skill. Under each key skill, there was the intended outcome at the end of the first year and an explanation as to why that particular skill was important within the context of social studies. The key skills were assessed in the usual formal manner through assignments in which the key skills element was made explicit and also in the usual module assessments. Personal Academic Records (PARs) were to be introduced in which the student was encouraged to record any skills activity outside of their area of study.

The concept of key skills was introduced in a lecture to the students, which I attended, where they were asked to complete their skills audits, retaining copies for themselves. In the accompanying handout, there was information about skills, but no explicit information of where they were to get help if they needed it, for example, some students would come in with a lower level than others in IT and might need initial extra support to build up their confidence rather than persevere alone. As not all students attended the lecture, this handout would be their only source of information. The implications of this for one particular student will be examined in chapter 5. The notion of skills being acquired through other means than academic study is addressed in the section of their PARs, but on their own admission, this was a new

initiative for the department and needed further development. Students, however, were made aware of the fact that they could develop a broader range of skills if they wished to pursue it themselves, but were not given specific guidance on how to do so. This was brought out by one of the participants of my study and will be discussed in chapter 5.

3.12: School of Education, Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE)

This department, of the three, had the largest group of students taking part in the project, with approximately 300 students, all of whom were involved. The department also had a history of key skills development, but, the year that my participants began their course, it became more extensive, with new approaches to embed key skills in as relevant a manner as possible considering the wide range of subject areas within the course. These subjects include Modern Foreign Languages and mathematics, the two areas in which my participants were engaged.

The skills being highlighted were communication, application of number and information and communication technology. The latter is that specified by the DfEE as the statutory requirement of a newly qualified teacher. Once they are practising teachers, they would be required to teach key skills to others as well as further developing the skills themselves, alongside teaching the skills relevant to their subject areas appropriate to the 14-19 age group.

The skills development of the PGCE students was part of the Record of Professional Development (RoPD) system already in

existence on the course. The onus of identifying and developing such skills as students felt they were lacking, was on the students themselves, although support and resources were made available to them, and they had specific RoPD groups in which skills were identified and targets set. In their RoPD folders, the students were given information on opportunities for the development of the skills and extensive key skills descriptors for all three skills, which, for communication and application of number were adapted from the QCA specifications, level 3, and for ICT, adapted from the curriculum for Initial Teacher Training.

In addition to the key skills audit common to all the departments taking part in the project, key skills audits were also administered in the School of Education towards the beginning of the course, but these were not purely self assessments. Tasks relevant to the course were set, such as evaluating Ofsted reports and school league tables statistically, for the application of number, and giving a short presentation based on their pre course primary experience for communication. Tutors, peers and the students themselves then assessed these tasks in terms of skills and tutors were asked to recommend whether they thought students needed support in any of the areas specified. This support was made available on Friday afternoons of the first semester up till Christmas, ten sessions maximum, mainly in the form of drop in workshops or an occasional demonstration or lecture. Students were in school placements on Monday to Thursday, and attended lectures or tutorials on Friday mornings. These Friday afternoons were for private study.

However, on reflection, the Friday afternoon sessions were

not as successful as had at first been hoped. They were only scheduled to run for ten weeks and then students would have to seek help from their tutor who would direct them towards the appropriate person. This could have been for pragmatic reasons as the students were out of university in their school placements for most of the first three months of the calendar year, and would not be in university except on Fridays. According to the support tutor for communication, because the sessions were voluntary, and there were so many other demands on the students' time, she felt that those who needed help were not coming along to them. All three different key skills support sessions ran at the same time so students needed to prioritise their needs. Also, Friday afternoons were often the only times that some students could access the IT facilities in the resources centre to prepare their work or to deal with their e-mail, or even to access the self directed learning IT package on the School of Education web page. One tutor felt that many students gave priority to IT, because they would all have to teach it, to some extent. On the other hand, they did not like to admit that they were lacking in literacy skills such as spelling and punctuation, and would go along reluctantly to the workshops only on the advice of their tutor.

3.13: Summary of the three Schools

The main issues to be brought out of the above summaries which impact upon the participants in my study are:

- Different understandings of key skills by each school
- How skills are developed and assessed
- Transferability of skills
- Different emphasis on particular skills
- The students' perceptions of their skills development

I will discuss each one individually below, referring to the schools as appropriate.

3.14: Different understandings of key skills by each School

By using their own ideas of what key skills were, each school was giving its own meaning and terms of reference to the skills in such a way as to ask the question, 'What does it mean to be an English graduate?', or 'What attributes can one expect a sociology graduate to possess?' rather than, 'What would a graduate of this university, from any discipline, possess in terms of skills?' This may be due to the fact that each department was acting alone as a separate case study within the research project. It might have been possible, in the longer term, to put on supporting courses for other disciplines in a reciprocal way, for example, the School of English could put on a course on communication skills for other Schools or the School of Mathematics putting on help with numbers. This reluctance to work inter-departmentally may be due to pressures of work and lack of time, but may also be due to the perceived nature of a traditional university education, that by concentrating too much on skills, it might devalue the end product in a Russell Group university (for example, see Rowland, 2001). This was a problem voiced by one of the team leaders who had his doubts about his ability

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to convince other staff in his School of the value of an outcome led curriculum.

Level 4 of the QCA Key Skills Specifications (QCA, 2000) was considered the level at which graduates should show mastery. However, the project group leaders decided not to use these specifications as the majority felt that they were too narrow and did not define what they thought a graduate should achieve, perhaps reflecting the point. None of the departments had wanted to embed all of the six key skills as specified by QCA, but preferred to identify those skills which they felt were already implicit within their courses, or to embed those skills which they felt were becoming increasingly necessary within their particular discipline (Chapple & Tolley, 2000; Young, 2001; Hodgson & Spours, 1997). Each School, then, was attempting to embed different key skills in different ways, some wishing to be very explicit to their students that the key skills were part of their course, whilst others fought that notion and felt there was no need to do this as they wanted the skills to be fully embedded in the subject matter.

For the participants in my study who have had little experience of key skills, and their place in the curriculum, this might cause some confusion.

3.15: How skills are developed and assessed

All three Schools recognised the need for individual students to examine their own perception of their skills and concentrate on raising them to the required standard. The School of Education provided workshop drop in sessions for the first few weeks of its PGCE course, but the other two

schools addressed this in different ways. The Department of English Studies put the onus on the student via personal tutorials and in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, students were given instructions that support was available to them, although this had not been made explicit as to how they might access it. Support to students in key skills needs to be offered in a very positive way, as some of the skills are personal skills, such as working with others, and feedback can be perceived as negative if felt to be aimed at one's personality rather than academic achievement. Structures and support mechanisms such as the workshops were a positive way of encouraging students to seek help, although, as stated above, some saw this in a more negative way, as remedial. Perhaps this is because they were about to become teachers, and saw this kind of support in a different light. If students were given an assignment, for example, that needed the use of IT, then there must be clear indications of how to get the training or skills required to complete that assignment otherwise students may have felt that they were the only ones who were struggling, and might not want admit that they needed help, internalising and personalising the 'failure' as their own. For mature women students who may not have used computers in such a consistent way as many younger people, this could be perceived as a problem by them, and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

3.16: Transferability of skills

Transferability of skills and their acquisition outside of academic interests was not discussed in the project. This issue could have been given more weight, particularly with mature students who have many activities outside of their

studies that could be relevant to their skills development and that they may not have considered as assets without prompting. They needed to be made aware of the importance of extracurricular activities in self development and encouraged to consider this as part of their personal development whilst at university and beyond. Most students need to be shown how to manage this type of learning, as it is a different way of looking at their learning experience compared to the more familiar content based education, particularly the participants in this study who will have had a gendered education as outlined in chapter 2. This reflective way of assessing one's own abilities is a skill in itself and needs to be made explicit to enable the student to take more control over their own development. Once students became aware of the all-embracing nature of the acquisition of skills, their whole view of education tended to change. Whilst the three Schools were encouraging their students to manage their own learning, I would argue that there needed to be more emphasis on personal development outside of the university courses, whereas most of the weight was placed on academic development and in achieving the qualification, which is often the perception of the students, too.

The ethos of transferable skills is that they are not just present in academic disciplines, but are being developed throughout life in all situations. Students who take subsidiary modules in other schools or departments would also have experience of practising skills in different ways and these would need to be encompassed within the existing framework. New ways of recording and assessing these skills would also be needed. A further difficulty would be the notion of prior achievement and how far back one could go to class

something as a transferable skill if it has not been used for a certain length of time in a different situation. This would impact upon mature students if they were reflecting on skills gained prior to attending university.

3.17: Different emphasis on particular skills

If the development of key skills and the changes in teaching and learning in higher education is employer led, then what the university considers most important in the area of skills is not compatible at this stage. Employers are more concerned with what their employees can do, rather than what they know, emphasising the 'softer' skills such as working with others and problem solving as more important than the 'harder' skills of numeracy or IT. All three Schools are embedding the three key skills of communication, application of number and IT to a lesser or greater extent, sometimes using different headings, but which generally reflect the skills of the Key Skills Qualification. Communication is probably the key skill most emphasised in the three departments, but this may be because of the nature of the subject areas, or there may be a connection between the type of course chosen by mature women and how it is perceived as a subject.

3.18: The students' perceptions of their own skills development

The final point is to consider how much importance students actually place on the development of their key skills. This will depend, of course, on how the concept is put across to them, but also where they actually put the development of skills in their own hierarchy of needs as regards their course at

university. From previous work, it has been shown that students, who have come through an educational culture which has emphasised the need to pass examinations, believe that grades and results count for more than skills as exemplified and shown earlier by the work of James, (2000). These students often feel that skills development and assessment is just 'another thing to do', and will not give it as much importance as academic work. All members of staff who are implementing the key skills project must be convinced in their own minds of the importance of the work, otherwise students will not perhaps give it the importance that the team leaders hope they will. Students' own reactions to the key skills project has formed the basis of the third round of interviews completed with the volunteers in my study, reported in chapter 5.

3.19: Summary

This chapter has attempted to draw together the contested notions of the nature and purpose of knowledge and skills acquisition in higher education and its response to the needs of employers. With the pressure from governments on universities to produce graduates who are 'work ready' in terms of skills as well as knowledge, there have been a number of different responses.

A leading role was taken by the QCA in developing key skills that could be measured and accredited, mainly through vocational routes but then aimed at all students whether in schools, colleges or workplace training. This in turn, mainly through Lord Dearing's report on higher education (NCIHE,

1997), began to focus more on higher education, and the perceived responsibility to develop skills therein.

The debates ranged as to whether this was the responsibility of higher education, and if so, what form should skills development take – should it use the QCA specifications, should it embed the skills or offer courses as add on? This led to an important debate on whether skills could actually be transferable, and how this transferability could be demonstrated and assessed. Many saw the skills agenda as another government initiative to keep the status quo, and that marginalized groups such as women and mature students would still stand outside of the arena, looking in.

The implications for the women in my study have been considered through a discussion on a research project on embedding key skills in a traditional university, in which the women will be participating in their first year at university. The following chapter will discuss the methodology and theoretical framework which will be used in this qualitative study of mature women.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.0: Introduction

This chapter will explore the methodology I use for the thesis. It begins with a discussion of why I have chosen to use a qualitative approach as opposed to a quantitative one given the nature of the investigation into the experience of women in higher education and their skills. I then move on to discuss feminist epistemology and feminist methodology, why this is important to my work, and how it impacts upon the way I conduct my interviews. However, feminist methodology has not been used uncritically, and I justify why I perceive that there are a number of flaws in this methodology and how this fits with the way I perceive the participants of the research and myself as a researcher.

Due to the nature of the investigation of a marginalised group in society, the issue of power is important for the analysis of data. There follows sections on power based on feminist readings of Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault and how their analyses can be used to highlight the powerful discourses running through society which oppress women.

The final section will outline the research methods and data collection methods used in the thesis and give an account of the biographical detail of the cohort of women who took part in the study. Issues of validity and reliability will then be discussed, and the ethical guidelines that inform the research will be described. A final section on the process of the interviews links the methodology to the analysis in the

following chapter by showing how each set of interviews informed the next in an ongoing analytical way.

4.1: Qualitative and quantitative paradigms

The nature of this research is to explore the lives of individual women, and their experience of higher education in university. There is no hypothesis to be tested; therefore I have chosen to use an interpretive approach, informed by feminist methodology. This chapter will explain and justify the use of this approach.

When embarking upon a research study, a number of choices have to be made based upon the nature of the study. Perhaps the most important choice is between the positivist, objective and quantifiable method and the more qualitative method which reflects the philosophical stance of taking in the rich complexity of the social world that explores an individual perspective. This latter approach is therefore more suitable for the individual participants in my study.

Positivist research methods are not appropriate here as they are more suited to the natural sciences, whereas I am interested in using social construction as the approach to investigating meaning for the participants in the study. This social influence cannot be removed to produce a quantifiable objective study. Cohen and Manion (1996) suggest that quantitative methods:

> *…fail to take account of our unique ability to interpret our experiences and represent them to ourselves. We can, and do construct theories about ourselves and our*

world; moreover, we act on these theories (Cohen and Manion, 1996, p 25).

Positivist methods produce generalisations based on what can often be restrictive questions, requiring closed answers. As such, the data produced can be of little consequence for those requiring a deeper investigation into a topic. Scientific findings, based on rigorous methods and objectivity are far removed from the everyday life which this study seeks to investigate. Research findings are unavoidably influenced by social structures and the cultural backgrounds of the participants (Flick, 2002).

This research is not about measurement, but about seeking a deep understanding and insight into the respondents' perceptions of their skills in terms of their participation in higher education. Quantitative methods which use extensive surveys and questionnaires, by the use of restrictive and standardising coding can miss, ignore or even destroy the richness of data in the responses of participants (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Silverman, 1993; Cohen & Manion, 1996). The use of a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis will allow me to investigate and follow up interesting and possibly unexpected aspects that may not have been catered for in a more formulaic approach. Thus the element of fluidity and flexibility of interviews can reflect more meaningful data, and explore the more personal aspects of the research in a sensitive way. As the cohort is a small group of less than twenty women overall within one university, the use of quantitative methods would be inappropriate in terms of statistical findings and analysis.

I began this research with no hypothesis, and planned for the research to be inductive. As a longitudinal study, I expected changes to occur in the way the women in my study perceived themselves and their skills over their time in higher education. I was not specifically looking for generalisations, although there may be some, but to explore the meaning that the women give to their everyday experiences in their natural setting. The themes would be emergent rather than closed (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). However, even though each person in the study, including the researcher, is unique, it does not preclude the fact that implications can be examined and conclusions drawn from the research.

Postmodernity has initiated moves away from grand narratives, and re-introduces those groups and individuals who have previously been ignored or marginalised by society, particularly women but also groups such as those defined by their race or sexuality, be they men or women. The postmodern condition is explored fully by Lyotard (1989) who claims that these grand narratives had previously been used to legitimise the importance of scientific research that will eventually lead to progress and the advancement of knowledge. With the collapse of these grand narratives, a crisis occurs as to the inability to decide what is true and what is just, and the legitimisation of knowledge. Lyotard does not discuss patriarchy as one of the ideologies that posit eternal truths, but postmodernism can be a helpful tool in understanding ideologies, and uncovering different truths. Creed (1994) pulls out the similarities between postmodernism and feminism which include the critique of systems of power that authorise certain representations over others, that there is a binary divide, and that both support

the importance of difference. This binary divide is where one part of the binary is privileged over the other. Postmodernism sees marginalised groups as 'other', and within feminism, the less privileged of the male/female binary is 'woman' as 'other'. However, one must be careful when looking at research methodologies, not to fall into the dualist trap of quantitative/qualitative divide, which is itself a binary. I have chosen to use qualitative methods because it is most suitable to my research, but have no desire to reject the idea of quantitative research, the value of which is discussed at the end of this section.

Emphasis is now placed on a more local rather than a universal picture, and this opens the way for oral and individual methods of enquiry. A postmodern approach is more likely to raise questions than to provide answers, thus the researcher will be able to reflect upon and rethink assumptions about interpretations (Atkinson, 2003). This study therefore is not testing a universal validity, but looks more at local traditions and ways of living within a certain section of society and a particular institution (Flick, 2002). My research is situated in an institute of higher education, with a specific group of mature women and explores the complexities of interaction between the two. Marshall and Rossman (1999) believe that the environmental setting in which the research takes place is indicative of understanding the life experience of the individuals:

> *Human actions are significantly influenced by the setting in which they occur; thus one should study their behaviour in real life situations. The social and physical setting – schedules, space, pay and rewards – are*

internalised notions of norms, traditions, roles and
values are all crucial aspects of the environment (p 57).

This environmental setting with emphasis on social setting can often lead to what Geerz (1973) describes as 'thick description', which includes events that are important to participants, but that the researcher may not, at first see the relevance, but when put into context by the participant becomes more understandable. This allows the researcher to probe beneath surface appearances and understand the practices and discourses within a society that they may not at first have considered. Thus I will be asking the women to describe the process of how they came back to education, and to describe what they consider to be the reasons, in their own environment and experience.

From the outset, then, it was clear that a qualitative approach would be the most appropriate for this study. One of the key characteristics of qualitative research is that it is interpretive, rather than normative:

> *…the central endeavour in the context of the*
> *interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective*
> *world of human experience. To retain the integrity of*
> *the phenomena being investigated, efforts are made to*
> *get inside the person and to understand from within*
> (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p 26).

One cannot understand human actions without exploring the meaning that the participants themselves give to those actions. Many of these actions are based on shared experience and assumptions such as feelings, beliefs and

values. However, these cannot be taken for granted and deeper perspectives can be attained through face to face interaction (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Only such methods can do justice to the complexity of everyday life and explore the multiple realities of the participants. The aim of this research is to view and put forward the analysis of data from the perspective of the respondents wherever possible, although the mediation of the researcher needs to be considered. This is explored more fully in the sections below. As this is a longitudinal study, it will enable me to establish a rapport and be able to empathise with the women through sustained periods of interaction, and permit me access to their inner thoughts as much as they will allow (Bryman, 1992). This clearly has certain difficulties which will be discussed in the section on insider/outsider below. However, as Murphy & Dingwall point out:

> *Qualitative research is well equipped to study the dynamic nature of settings and behaviours. Longitudinal studies, for example, can fill in the gaps between an intervention and its outcome* (2003, p 37).

Although Murphy & Dingwall are discussing medical intervention, it can also be applicable to this research as the participants are part of another research project which aims at embedding key skills in the curriculum, so this is the intervention that is taking place. This key skills project, *Embedding Key Skills within a Traditional University,* was discussed in detail in chapter 3.

Qualitative research acknowledges the researcher as part of the research. There can be no absolute objectivity, and the

methodology accepts the subjectivity of all participants including the researcher. This longitudinal study allows me to enter into the lives of my participants and follow them through their journey before, during and after higher education. As the researcher, I was not a participant as in action research, but have my own experiential background as a mature woman in higher education. However, neither am I just an observer of their experience, or a 'data collection instrument' who should 'try not to let his *(sic)* own biases, opinions or curiosity affect his behaviour' (Tuckman, 1972). Cohen & Manion (1996) argue that:

> *Individuals' behaviour can only be understood by the researcher sharing their frame of reference: understanding of individuals' interpretations of the world around them has to come from the inside, not the outside* (p 26).

As a researcher who accepts my own subjectivity, I shall try to enter the interview situation without bias, whilst accepting that the truth posited by the interviewee will be one of many multiple truths and interpretations. Kvale (1996) distinguishes between what he calls a 'biased subjectivity' and a 'perspectival subjectivity' in terms of interpreting data, but these ideas can also be applied to the interview process. A biased subjectivity would be one that would only look for one interpretation based upon what the interviewer believed would be the meaning of the text, and which backed up any preconceptions. A more perspectival approach would result in different perspectives and meanings given to the responses:

> *With an explication of the perspectives adopted toward an interview text and a specification of the researchers' questions posed to an interview passage, several interpretations of the same texts will not be a weakness, but a richness and a strength of interview research* (Kvale, 1996, p 212).

My research, then will seek to draw out the different perspectives and to take them into account in the analysis of the data. With qualitative research, the questions asked are not identical within each interview, but based more on responding to the interviewees within the interview situation, so this will produce alternative perspectives and add to the richness of the data.

However, before moving on, I would like to comment on the quantitative/qualitative divide, that there can be value for feminist researchers to use quantitative methods in particular circumstances. Some topics lend themselves well to anonymous surveys and information that women may not feel able to discuss face to face can be recorded anonymously, such as domestic violence, or sexual abuse as a child. These surveys can inform and help to change attitudes and bring to light the magnitude of women's oppression which may otherwise have lain hidden. Kelly, Burton and Regan's study (1994) of sexual abuse led them to consider that the people they surveyed were at different stages as to what they felt able to disclose. Their survey allowed for extended answers, and some answered yes or no to questions, others briefly answered questions and some gave detailed experiences of their lives. They commented that the first group may not have been ready to disclose and would probably not have

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given any more information if they had been interviewed face to face, so the survey had been useful in identifying abuse where the women would probably not have come forward to be interviewed.

The following section will discuss the type of methodology I have chosen and explain why the feminist perspective is important for the research. Before that, I will discuss feminist epistemology and show how it can impact on the creation of new knowledge.

4.2: Feminist epistemology

Feminist methodology challenges traditional methodologies by questioning existing theories of knowledge, about who creates knowledge and who can 'know'. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and how that knowledge is justified, particularly in the context of the limits and different ways of knowing. Orthodox sociological thinking often relies on common sense, custom and tradition and reason, based on masculine authority (Harding, 1987). In this androcentric world, this can lead to only partial understandings, whereas a feminist methodology generates its problematics from a woman's perspective, which is different to the dominant voice of men in traditional understanding. This is particularly important when women researchers are working with women to produce new knowledge as that is more likely to produce knowledge that is unbiased by androcentrism.

Knowledge produced by men or those working within the social structures produced by men, effectively silences and devalues the voices of women. From a social justice

perspective, women should have an equal say in what knowledge is produced, and in the example of universities, how that knowledge is produced and distributed and how those institutions are designed and administered. Social justice is the concept of a just society based on human rights and equality, where individuals and groups have fair treatment and can fulfill their potential. It seeks to break down the economic, social and educational barriers that create inequality in any form.

In order to create new knowledge that is based on social justice concepts, feminist researchers listen carefully to how women think about their own, other women's and men's lives to critically analyse how traditional epistemology conceptualises men's and women's lives. This may raise issues that traditional androcentric interviewers may not perceive as important or significant within the current social paradigm (Harding, 1987). My research is not to see women as victims in society or to 'add them back in' to current thinking, but to see them as women in an androcentric society with something to contribute to knowledge for both women and men.

However, knowledge creation should be value free, without bias either way, thus critics of feminist epistemology challenge the idea that there can be a 'feminist' knowledge, that a politicised enquiry such as that of feminist enquiry is just as subjective as that they claim to be androcentric. Clearly, just because they are women and are oppressed, they are not going to produce an accurate description of reality, but it will be subjective (Hawkesworth, 1989). This

subjectivity, and the knowledge produced, is not only influenced by social factors, but:

> *The perspective of each knower contains blind spots, tacit presuppositions, and prejudgments of which the individual is unaware* (Hawkesworth, 1989, p 554).

This postmodern view emphasizes the individual, that no two accounts of the same situation can ever be the same, due to the fragmented and complex nature of 'telling'; who the 'teller' and 'told' are; where the 'telling' takes place and a myriad of other variables. This can reduce the creation of knowledge to a mere text, which has no meaning other than the words used, and that the words have no meaning because language is a system that obfuscates meaning (Jenkins, 1991: Munslow, 1997). This takes us into the realm of post structuralism at its most extreme, yet it highlights issues of power/knowledge through systems of language. It does however, suggest that there are many voices to be listened to, and many sides to a story that need to be taken into account. This is important for this research in that there will be a multiplicity of experiences within a similar situation that will need to be valued and analysed rather than be reduced to a single viewpoint.

Rather than be restricting, feminist knowledge allows the world to be seen in an enlarged perspective (Harding, 1987). Historically there have been a number of new perspectives on the world which have added to knowledge creation such as Marxism which has allowed us to understand class struggles, and more recently, post-colonialism that has challenged knowledge of other cultures in a more positive way. The

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women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s has given women a sense of right to have women's interests represented (Hartmann, 1987). Each of these movements allows our own culture to move forward. Nevertheless, not all cultural changes are advantageous to women. The Renaissance, for example, has historically been seen as a rebirth of culture, of ideas of humanism and a progressive force for civilization, yet many women lost privileges they had enjoyed under the period of chivalry that preceded the Renaissance.

Nonetheless, the multi-faceted culture that we live in today is continually changing very quickly and can be seen as transitional, thus feminism is as much a product of culture as a force for change within it. The section below sets out how using a feminist methodology can put this search for new and different knowledge into practice.

4.3: Feminist methodology

As a woman conducting research amongst other women I am interested in a methodology that puts women at the centre and uncovers the cultural and institutional sources of oppression, and one that will value women's subjective experience. The assumptions of oppression, which will be discussed in detail below, are that the society in which this research takes place is one in which male power dominates, and that a university is a patriarchal institution within this patriarchal society; the knowledge which passes as objective or 'taken for granted' is in fact knowledge created by a largely white, male middle class body of academics. Feminist methodology seeks to redress the balance and has explicit

emancipatory goals. However, before discussing this issue of how emancipatory my work can and should be, I will explore how feminist methodology has evolved and the value it has to my study.

During the 1970s, feminists such as Kate Millett (1977), Shulamith Firestone (1970), Anne Oakley (1974) and Germaine Greer (1970) began to challenge the assumptions underlying social science research and question the power relations in operation that made it androcentric. They recognised that although women's lives were present, these lives were represented by the sociological approach developed by men; therefore, these lives were misrepresented by men's perceptions of women. This was very much in keeping with the liberal feminism of the time, that women should have a voice, rather than be seen as peripheral (Acker, 1991; May, 2002). Historically women were seen as housewives, bringing up children in the family unit, and being dependent on a male provider (Mies, 1991). As domestic responsibilities, (i.e. in the private sphere) were not given as high a status as work outside the family, (i.e. the public sphere) women were perceived as a subordinate group in society.

This simplistic view of women does not correspond to the experience of many women today. They do not necessarily fit into this theory constructed by men, but become who they are by their diverse life experiences, and many have more complex backgrounds. The women in my study are entering higher education at a mature age, so most will have been subjected to a gendered educational background as discussed in chapter 2, a diverse work history, perhaps including a

career break for child rearing, and a variety of part time work fitting around domestic commitments. Most still have domestic responsibilities and some still have to work outside the home.

In the 1980s, this liberal feminist view began to be challenged. With the second wave of feminism, women became more attentive to the differences between individual women, such as class and race, and new methodologies began to emerge, in which women situated themselves differently (hooks, 1982). As well as uniting women, feminist research was also dividing them and more mixed standpoints emerged (May, 2002). Issues of power became paramount in investigating the lives of women. These issues of power will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but for this section, the issues of power being considered relate to the fact that much liberal feminism was seen as being theorised by white intellectual women who did not speak for working class, black or Muslim women, for example (hooks, 1982; Haw, 1995; Brine, 1999; Parker-Jenkins, 1995).

The realisation that much research was androcentric by default if not by purpose has made many reflect upon research methodologies and how they could be more inclusive (Eichler, 1991: Kleinman, 2007). Androcentricity is the view of the world from a male perspective through a social political and intellectual lens. There are many examples of how women have been marginalised such as single sex terms being used for both sexes; sexual groups dichotomised and given particular characteristics that do not overlap; sequence of the sexes becoming grammatically correct, such as 'Mr and Mrs'; male terms used in a generic way such as 'manned'

instead of 'staffed' and explanations of words being from the male term of reference such as 'polygamy' being described as 'a man with several wives' rather then 'a wife who shares her husband' (Eichler, 1991). Reinharz refers to this system of power as 'gynopia' (1991).

In the society in which we now live, power is unequally distributed, structured differently for different types of people (Haw, 1995). Women are still a disadvantaged group in terms of social status, education, employment and political power and need to be recognised as such. Equal Opportunities legislation should not be seen merely as a way of allowing women access, but as a way of challenging the oppression which surrounds them. Emancipation means breaking down these social constructs, understanding women in their own right as subjects rather than objects in a man's world, recognising their diversity rather than generalising about them (Coats, 1994; Acker, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). Harstock (1987) argues from a feminist standpoint that if human activity is set up in opposing ways for different groups, than there will be a natural division whereby one group is dominant, and the other subjugated, the latter getting the lesser part of the bargain. She takes the view that women, as the oppressed group, must continually struggle against the tide for their voices to be heard.

However, this essentialism began to be challenged by women who did not fit into the category of the leading feminist writers, who were usually white, intellectual and European or American. Essentialism is the belief that women have fixed traits that make them women, that does not allow for variation amongst individuals or over time. It has often been

used as an explanation for social behaviour that cannot be changed. For example, the belief that men are physically stronger than women is because of their hormones, therefore it is biologically determined and cannot be changed. However, essentialism was useful in the early days of the women's movement as a rallying point for the struggle. This began to change when some women who saw oppression as a much more complex issue rather than just patriarchy began to voice issues of race, class and sexuality, and the fact that men and women can stand side by side to fight oppression such as racism (hooks, 1982 for example). There cannot, therefore be a fine line drawn between the patriarchal oppression of women and the multi oppressions and common interests that dwell within and across it.

The terms sex and gender thus began to take on different meanings; one's sex is what one is born as, one's gender is conditioned by society and culture and can thus be challenged and changed (for example De Beauvoir, 1953; Greer, 1970). This leaves the definition of 'woman' open to critique and takes on an anti-essentialist stance, that not all women have the same traditional attributes of being a woman, such as a 'natural' caring nature.

Feminist research attempts to validate each woman's experience. By studying individual experience, it can highlight that the individual problems that beset women are often generated by the larger social structure. Each individual's experience is located in the social relations within which we live, which are, in this society, particularly oppressive to women. By revealing that these social relations have been constructed and are not just 'the way things are',

they can be challenged and thus become more open to change (Freire, 1972).

Freire's work (1972; 1998) does not refer directly to feminism, but was more an educational philosophy. His work began with teaching literacy to Brazilian peasants in order to give them power – literacy was a condition for voting in a presidential election. However, he used his teaching to help others develop a consciousness of the oppression that surrounded them, and to help them transform that world. His pedagogy was developed within a particular historical and political framework, based on class struggle. The transformation of the world that he envisaged was based on a common understanding of oppression, and has been criticised by feminists that it was androcentric and did not take into account multiple oppressions, particularly between the sexes (Brady, 1994). It was felt that his work is difficult to put into practice because of these multiple oppressions where women can both be oppressed and oppress others in different spheres of their lives, often unconsciously, which Audre Lorde (1984) calls 'the oppressor within us'. In an educational context, this can cause frustration, and even anger, as we will see with one of the participants to this study, when there is no commonality or understanding of the different oppression between students and teachers. Freire's work is more about seeking universal goals and does not specifically deal with the teachers' subject positions and of conflicting histories in his discussion of the equality of teachers and students.

However, this does not mean that his pedagogical ideas should be rejected out of hand, and some feminists have used his ideas. Bel hooks, an American academic and feminist,

claimed that she was 'dying of thirst' when she first encountered the work of Freire, and although she did not agree with all his ideas, she used them, claiming that the fact that the 'water was muddied a little', did not matter. As a black woman, discriminated against because of her race, and also by white western, middle class feminists who she felt only spoke for white middle class women, she was profoundly influenced by his consciousness raising (hooks, 1982). Freire called this 'conscientisation', where the oppressed come together, sharing their experience, and through this reading of the world, come to new knowledge (Freire, 1972):

> *To have work that promotes one's liberation is such a powerful gift – that it does not matter so much if the gift is flawed* (hooks, 1993).

This is important for the feminist movement as women in the 1960s and 1970 used consciousness raising groups to move forward the second wave of feminism that led to a re-evaluation of who and what the feminist movement was for. Hooks states that she felt more included in the work of Freire than she did in feminist classics such as Betty Frieden's *Feminist Mystique* (1963).

One aspect of Freire's work which is important to this thesis is the emphasis of personal experience as a source of knowledge, as outlined above in 'conscientisation'. For the women in my study, their life experience will affect their approach to learning, and the sharing of their life experience with me in their interviews will also shape my perceptions of them as they progress through their time in higher education and beyond. Thus it can be seen how Freire's ideas link well

with feminist ideas of naming the oppression in order to change it. His ideas of dialogue, that one cannot learn without others can also be applied to feminist interviewing, that new knowledge can only be created by dialogue and discussion.

For me, Freire's work comes closest to a feminist vision of social transformation where one can apply it to a formerly silenced group who can challenge the dominant approaches of learning and definitions of knowledge in a society. So, although Freire did not discuss women's oppression specifically in his most influential text, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* writers such as Weiler have critiqued this and adapted his ideas, firstly in her work on women teachers in the 1980s (1999) and then as a way to develop a feminist pedagogy of difference (1991). In this latter article, Weiler explores personal experience as a source of knowledge and truth:

> *As feminists explore the relationship of authority, theory and political action, they raise questions about the categories and claims for truth underlying both the consciousness raising and feminist pedagogy. These claims rest on categories of experience and feelings as guides to theoretical understanding and political change. Basic to the Freirean concept of conscientisation is the belief in the ability of all people to be knowers and to read both the word and the world* (Weiler, 1991, p 463).

Thus she draws out the similarities between Freirean and feminist pedagogy, both of which seek justice and empowerment for oppressed groups, and extending and

building upon the emancipatory possibilities of his work. There is still a tension between there being a common assumption of oppression by women and the many different conflicts within feminism, suggested by hooks (1982) above. However, it does draw out how women, by accepting their own subjectivities, can interpret and critique the world within which they exist, which Giroux calls, 'a language of possibilities' (cited by McLaren & Leonard, 1993). For the women in my study, they will have a myriad of experiences, but will all be reflecting on that experience, and hopefully using it to create knowledge within the university setting in which they will partake of their education.

Like Foucault, whose work will be discussed in detail in a following section in this chapter, Freire, as critiqued by Brady (1991) acknowledges that power is always a site of struggle:

> *The issue of who speaks, for whom, under what conditions, and in what manner, is intimately tied to a politics of representation that can only be understood by acknowledging how race, class and gender shape power that legitimises certain forms of authority based on issues of exclusion and marginalisation. Women and racial minorities need to represent* **themselves** (Brady, 1991, p 148)*.*

She is suggesting that women must have the freedom to discuss their oppression, however different it may be to others, in a safe environment, and recognise that feminism is only one of a number of discourses of oppression that must be overcome for social justice for all. According to Freire, education should allow them to do so. He rejects what he

calls 'banking' education where information is transferred from the teacher to the student as a gift where students listen, memorize and repeat the knowledge given to them. In Shor's critique, he suggests Freire sees education as a place where:

> *The individual and society are constructed, a social action which can either empower or domesticate students. In the liberating classroom suggested by Freire's ideas, teachers pose problems derived from student life, social issues, and academic subjects, in a mutually created dialogue* (Shor, 1993, p 25).

This will become important when analysing the experience of the women in this study when discussing how they felt their life experience was valued during their education, or whether they felt they had received a 'banking' education, or elements of both. In a school system based on the 'banking' system, as well as memorising facts, students internalise the values and habits of a society uncritically, and after many years in a mass educational system like this, the women in my study may have felt domesticated by their education. As uncritical people, they may possibly blame themselves for their own perceived failures which may affect their approach to learning in higher education (Shor, 1993; Gore, 1993).

Many women, as already noted, have criticised Freire for not addressing the oppression of women, and his use of the male referent when discussing both males and females, but have found his critique of systems of power useful, and his utopian vision of education for liberation a light at the end of the

tunnel. Freire answered his critics in the foreword to McLaren & Leonard's book (1993):

> *Since the 1970's I have learned much from feminism and have come to define my work as feminist, seeing feminism closely connected to the process of self reflexivity and political action for human freedom.*

As one of the aims of feminist research is to liberate women by raising their consciousness of oppression in order to overcome it, therefore feminist research must produce knowledge that men and women together can use for the benefit of women. It should not simply be a study of women as objects but must be empowering in such a way as to uncover and overcome women's oppression and exploitation. Jane Thompson (1984) discussing radical education, states that it must validate women's experience and be empowering for those women. Her aim for her students is for them to be able to address the oppression of women, whether it is economic, political or social, and be able to challenge the system from within. I believe the same could be said of feminist research if it is to be truly liberating.

However, this does throw up many problems as I do not feel it is my place to politicise the women I am interviewing. Some of the women are more politically aware than others, and talk naturally about feminism; others are just beginning to be critically aware of the nature of the oppression they face as women. For some, which will become clear in the analysis chapter, entering higher education is an enormous step, and I did not feel it was my place to 'rock the boat' by challenging some of the coping mechanisms they were using. Quite often

these moments brought out feelings of alienation rather than empathy from within me:

> *Doing feminist research on unsympathetic populations can lead to conflicts between the researcher and participant's construction of the meaning of gendered experience* (Millen, 1997, p 1).

Millen questions the idea that giving women a voice will necessarily be empowering, and that by giving women the tools by which to analyse their own position in society may actually disempower them by undermining their short term coping mechanisms, the choices they make and their perceptions of themselves within the world in which they are operating. For the women in my study this could easily be so, as for many they see entering higher education as empowering themselves when compared to their gendered upbringing and the barriers they faced as young women when they did not have the opportunity to continue with their education. However, I believe the researcher still has the duty to analyse any data given from the theoretical perspective and framework that they have studied in preparation for the data collection. The researcher may have more of a picture of the constraining systems and structures of the social world that the women are entering than the women themselves.

The way I conceptualise my research in terms of being empowering is that I am giving the participants a voice, which may be personally liberating for them. Many women I have previously interviewed on a single occasion (Wallis & Mallia, 1997) have remarked that they had rarely been able to talk

about themselves at length before, or to reflect on their hopes and fears to anyone in such a way. Talking to another woman who had shared experiences about their feelings may have been a liberating experience for them. The interviewees for this thesis will also have the added benefit of a series of interviews, in which they may reflect upon their journey through higher education with the interviewer.

However, there are those for whom giving voice is not enough. Gorelick (1991) states that:

> *Merely collecting descriptive statistics or experiential data about women does not constitute feminist research. Feminist research must be part of a process by which women's oppression is not only described but challenged* (Gorelick, 1991 p 462).

Whilst agreeing with this view, I also believe that consciousness raising is not the role of the interviewer, but by applying this theory, the interviewer can uncover some of the underlying causes and processes of oppression that the women do not necessarily know. Mies (1993) emphasises that often true consciousness comes with a rupture in a woman's life, a death, a divorce, or perhaps entering higher education for the first time as a mature woman. Even participating in the research and creating new knowledge within the interview situation may allow the women in my study to reflect more critically on their lives.

4.4: Ontological assumptions

At this point, I would like to state the ontological position that I identify with within this research. Ontology is what is understood about reality, the beliefs that underpin and guide this research. The ontology permeates the actions and interpretations available to a researcher; they will always have a particular position whether or not they realise it, or can articulate it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Edwards 1999). There are a number of ontological positions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) but the two to be discussed here are positivism and post-positivism, and will be used to illustrate the position that I take in this research, which is the latter. Whilst positivism is more concerned with approaching human nature and experience from a predictable and generalisable angle, post-positivism values research taking place in the real or 'natural' world (Robson, 2002). Outcomes are not predictable and this type of approach:

> *Allows a search for different possibilities of making sense of human life, for other ways of knowing which do justice to the complexity, tenuity and indeterminacy of most of human experience* (Lather, 1986, p 259).

For my research, I believe that in the current social world within which we live, there is an emphasis on whose voice is heard, so I would reject a positivist approach as being too deterministic. The positivist voice that is currently 'heard' is the one which leads the way to whose knowledge is important, and whose concerns are represented. From a feminist standpoint, this voice is currently the male voice, and is often not challenged but is accepted as the *status quo*; the

way things are. To create new knowledge, voices that do not accept or reflect the *status quo* need to be listened to, to bring about change. The challenges outlined above by hooks (1982), for example, highlight the dangers of essentialism that all women are not the same and so differences as well as similarities need to be heard in the responses of the women in my study. Lather (1988) calls this, 'doing empirical research in an unjust world'.

This study is concerned with the experiences of women within a higher education context which, as has been shown in chapter 2, is dominated by the male view of the world. Feminist methodology aims not to be oppressive (Mies, 1991) but to equalise the relationship between the researcher and the researched in order for the women's voices to be heard. It is hoped that through the shared experience of gender, the research will be worthwhile for all parties involved. I now discuss how the interviews will be conducted in order to take into account the feminist aims.

4.5: Interviewing women within a feminist paradigm

It has often been suggested (Finch, 1984; Reinharz, 1992) that women interviewing women are more effective in revealing quality information as they suffer under the same societal structural subordination of their gender. Women subjects usually identify more readily with women researchers and are often more relaxed about talking about themselves. I believe that there is an advantage if the interviewer is a woman with similar life circumstances. The common thread with my interviewees is that we have all experienced higher education as mature women. This can lead to a deeper

understanding of a situation, whereas an empathetic outsider can only imagine what those feelings could be in a given situation. However, this can only be treated as a starting point as every woman's experience is unique and is coloured by issues such as age, race, class, sexuality, life experience and many other variables. Oakley's work on childbirth (1981) was one of the first to question the idea of the role of the researcher, and her own involvement with the women she interviewed. Whilst accepting that the personal view of the researcher on the topic being studied is not definitive, the research will have an intimate relationship with the researcher. There are a number of ways that women experience higher education as mature adults, and as Oakley points out, she often found herself in conflicting roles as researcher, friend, advisor and so on, that she reflected that human nature is not neat and tidy and that the fact that the boundaries mentioned above were often confused, highlighting the artificial barriers that often tend to be put up in research and in particular, the research/researcher relationship.

From my own prior experience of interviewing women, I had been initially surprised at how open they had been with me, a complete stranger. Many revealed intimate details of their lives to me, some admitting that they had not spoken about such matters so openly before. An illustration of this taken from my work with women in further education (Mallia, 1997) was of an Asian woman, who, after a recorded interview on why she was returning to learning had finished, went on to tell me about her life history and I was shocked and appalled at the way she had been treated by her family, yet she accepted that she could not change it, although she was

clearly very distressed by her situation. This raised many questions for me as to my responsibility as a woman and an interviewer. I had encouraged her to speak, yet I was going to walk away, never to see her again, and leaving her with, what felt to me, like an open wound. As a feminist I wanted to encourage her to take control of her life and move forward, yet this might destroy her coping mechanisms. I felt as powerless as she did in this situation. This was also noted in Skeggs' study of working class women, but as her participants were part of a long term study, she, like Oakley (1981) felt that she needed to respond in a different way:

> *Rarely were these women given much listening space or taken seriously. I listened to disclosures of violence, child abuse and sexual harassment. To some extent this jeopardised the research as a great amount of time was spent counselling rather than interviewing. But what else can you do? This is an ethical dilemma of feminist research* (Skeggs, 1994, p 80).

This problematic set of circumstances led me to consider the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and in order to minimise any effect in the interviews for this thesis, I decided to set aside part of the interview time for debriefing in order that both parties could discuss what feelings and emotions had been engendered. I would be able to give my own views on the situation, emphasising that this was my personal view gained from past experience and that it did not have any bearing on the value of their views, or any way imply that they were 'wrong' or 'right'. This is what I did on a number of occasions and this often led to further interesting data, so the 'official' interview was resumed by switching the

tape recorder back on, with the interviewees' permission. This provided an added dimension to the research in that certain questions could be asked after the interview was finished and any delicate situations discussed off record before they were reintroduced as 'official' data. There were, of course, a number of personal issues that the interviewees wanted to stay off record. However, as the researcher I had 'heard' these issues and could not help but be aware of them when analysing the taped data.

The initial interviews were intended to be as unstructured as possible, with the purpose of finding out about the interviewees' background and why they were returning to formal learning as mature women. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because structured interviews are often of limited use when trying to understand women's lives. This type of open interview is commonly associated with feminist research as early research on schooling or paid work, for example, showed a different perspective to that of men. The life experience that I was interested in could only be told from the perspective of the women, about how they had come to this point in their lives and had decided to return to learning as mature women, most of whom had children. Maynard & Purvis' work on researching women's lives shows a need for a different perspective to much previous sociological research:

> *The arguments were rooted in a critique of what were*
> *perceived to be the dominant modes of doing research*
> *which were regarded as inhibiting a sociological*
> *understanding of women's experiences. Quantitative*
> *research (particularly surveys and questionnaires) was*

> *seen to represent a 'masculinist' form of knowing, where the emphasis was on the detachment of the researcher and the collection and measurement of 'objective' social facts through a (supposedly) value-free form of data collection* (Maynard & Purvis, 1994, p 11).

The purpose of this type of interview is to allow the women the space to explore their own thinking and recollections, although I acknowledge that that can and did feel threatening to some of the women, who might have preferred a set of questions to answer (Acker, 1991). There are moves to advocate the importance of quantitative research methods, but for me, the concern with emotions and feelings is better suited with the type on interviews I advocate above. Most of the women were happy to talk about themselves once the interviews began, but a few found it difficult to talk about themselves without some prompting and guidance from me. This again raises the idea of the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and the factors that can affect the data. With any research, the researcher is often introduced as someone from a university which in itself places that person in a position of perceived authority from the beginning.

In any research, rules of confidentiality must be adhered to, and much of the literature on feminist research highlights the risk of exploitation of information given (for example, see Acker, 1991; Finch, 1984; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994). Rafferty (2004) suggests that there is an implicit contract between the researcher and the researched, that in return for telling the interviewer intimate

details of her life, the researcher will bear witness to them in as truthful a manner as possible, thus the interview is a 'deal' between two people who both have something to offer. One of the ways to minimise any potential exploitation or misrepresentation was planned as part of this research. As well as the debriefing session to discuss any issues raised, I also transcribed the interviews and gave a copy to each participant. This transcript would to be used before the next interview in order to clarify thinking for both the researcher and interviewee, and also to inform the next round of interviews. This would also involve the subject of the interview in the interview process and allow them to validate the use of their data, and for it to be of value to them as well as them being a participant in my research. I also prepared a questionnaire on how each participant had felt about being interviewed which addressed questions of potential exploitation. This is further discussed in the section on research methods.

Feminist research, in common with some other types of methodology, seeks to be reflective. Being reflective means exploring and critically examining the nature of the research process in an attempt to demonstrate the assumptions about gender. In order to create new knowledge, a critical perspective needs to be developed that calls into question the predominant intellectual tradition. Women's articulation of their experience is valuable because it creates awareness of the oppression outlined at the beginning of this chapter, yet, unless that oppression is subject to a critical reflection, it remains static. By reflection and action, 'the personal' becomes 'the political' and creates new knowledge that is valuable (Freire, 1972).

For me as the researcher, this reflection takes place throughout the research as I gain insight into the gender relations underlying the project through my interactions with the women. By keeping a research journal I have been able to reshape and reconceptualise my perceptions of my role and at the same time explore my own notions of empathy and alienation towards what the participants have told me. I discuss the use of my research journal in more detail further on in this chapter. However, I include here part of an entry I made after an early interview where the woman was discussing very personal matters and I was not sure how to react to the disclosures. It shows the tension between reacting as a fellow woman and as an interviewer, and made me reconsider my approach in subsequent interviews:

> *Not sure how I handled the interview situation, whether I probed to get 'good' data. Felt a bit embarrassed to press about personal matters even though I felt they were crucial. Tended to nod and leave silences (which worked most of the time)* (Research diary, June 1998).

For the interviewees, critical reflection can take place as the women try to find new aspects of their identity in the new role they are taking on as mature students in a university. Participation in higher education is often seen as a structural rupture point (Fonow and Cook, 1991) in which the women can use consciousness raising methods to question their beliefs and feelings before and after an event. Participation in this research and thinking and talking about these changes may allow them to do this.

4.6: Challenges to feminist research

Feminist research, however, has been criticised as irrational, ruled by emotions and with a tendency to personalise everything (Silverman, 1993). Yet, each person, the interviewer and interviewee, has her own idea of and may give a different meaning to the social constructs that bind us, and both will have a personal bias and subjectivity that cannot be ignored (Reinharz, 1992). I cannot, and do not wish to subsume my own experience and yet I am open to new ideas and ways of seeing the world which are different to my own. Dealing with my own standpoint was complex and I spent a considerable amount of time trying to locate this standpoint and resist the initial drive to strike a neutral position. Accepting my own subjectivity became a crucial turning point in my own ontological outlook, which had been discussed in a previous section. However, some criticisms of feminist methodology do impact on this study and will be explored below (Clegg, 1985).

Amongst others (for example, Millen, 1997), a leading qualitative researcher, David Silverman (1993; 1997) criticises feminist methods as he warns against the restriction of one particular philosophical methodology. Whilst agreeing with this sentiment, I would argue that even though interview data cannot offer us a literal truth of the respondents' reality, by analysing them from a feminist perspective, and checking back with respondents for confirmation, they can show that person's reality within a particular setting (Skeggs, 1994; Miller & Dingwall, 1997).

Oakley (1981) advocates this type of collaborative research and uses examples of her own work to show that the more she opened up about herself in her interviews, the more questions her respondents asked about her own experience and even asked her advice. However, Clegg (1985) points out that this cannot be a generalisation about methodology as Oakley's research topic was childbirth; the experience of which she believes encourages intimacy, as it is such a dynamic experience, and that not all research topics would perhaps encourage such intimacy.

Nevertheless, whilst Oakley talks about special empathy between women, more recent work has suggested that male and female interviewers would actually generate different types of knowledge (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Harding, 1997; Finch, 1993). Maureen Padfield and Ian Proctor (1996) attempted to put this to the test in a small project interviewing women by semi structured interviews, and sharing the interviewing between them. The women were asked if they felt the gender of the interviewer made a difference and most had not minded which. However, on the subject of abortion, more women disclosed to the female in a follow-up interview about their own experiences of abortion than they had to the previous male interviewer. This tends to support Oakley's claim about shared understandings between women and may in itself be seen as a coping mechanism.

Personally, I feel that something as life changing as returning to learning at a mature age is a very emotional and trepidatious activity, no matter how well prepared one feels; to share that with someone who has undergone the same process would encourage intimacy as seen by Oakley,

particularly if that person felt comfortable with the interviewer in terms of that shared empathy.

Yet I also acknowledge that it is not always possible to conduct research which is true to feminist orthodoxy and to one's own beliefs, so I feel that as a woman and a researcher I have had to make choices and adapt my methodology accordingly which will be outlined in the section on research methods. Because of the diversity of feminist theory (Clegg, 1985), no one feminist methodology can be explicit. Developing a feminist consciousness means being able to interpret social reality differently and no one person has the right to impose their own definition of reality on another. This can only come by a process of consciousness raising, and both researcher and researched are open to change. Stanley and Wise (1991) demonstrate this by dividing their reactions to their data from a particular project on obscene telephone calls into 'consciousness 1' and 'consciousness 2' as their responses changed once they as researchers began to reflect on their own reactions and the reactions of others to them and their research.

However, the assumption cannot be made that all the women in my study are 'ideological dupes of social class and femininity' (Skeggs, 1994, p 74). The idea that all women need consciousness raising could alter how they are perceived by the interviewer. In her guidelines for feminist methodology, Mies (1991) states that all feminist methodology must be in a form that fosters 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972), yet this could be patronising to a group who have a more pragmatic approach to feminism. They may not be in a state of unawareness of oppressive structures, but

have an acknowledgement that to survive, they have to work with what works for them within the existing structures. A particular strength of repeat interviews allows ideas to emerge on an individual basis, and for these ideas to be discussed and reflected upon in a sensitive way.

Feminist research, then, can be seen as more of a process than a methodology. When an interview takes place, the woman being researched is not just going to be a repository of knowledge waiting to deposit that knowledge into the researcher's tape recorder, but she is a person with her own ideas of reality and the research process may change the view of reality of both participants. This may well have a knock on effect as the researcher uses that altered view of reality when researching and speaking to a different participant, and also to the same woman at a later date on a subsequent interview. This is more evident in a study such as this which consists of a series of interviews with each woman over time.

One of the aims of early proponents of feminist research was equalising the relationship between the interviewer and respondents. This is now considered rather naïve and it is now acknowledged that the power relations between the interlocutors can change. Authors such as Skeggs (1994) and Maynard (1994) for example, refer to the 'intellectual biography' of the interviewer whose personal history is part of the process of understanding, and how the analysis will be produced.   The researcher's personal characteristics can also influence the power relationship in terms of class, age or race, for example. Interviewing a much younger women can be different to interviewing an older one, as there may be

shared background with women nearer my own age, whereas, a younger woman may regard me in a different and possibly deferential light, as my shared experience with the younger ones may be nearer my children's age, and thus a different sharing of experience would occur, if at all.

Drawing together the claims that there is a specific feminist methodology, I must refute the assertion that there is only one way to conduct feminist research. However, I do believe that there is a need for research which allows women to reflect upon their lives and to see that their position in society is restricted by the boundaries of that society which was created by men. The aim of my research is not to invite the women to rise up and overthrow the traditional patriarchal system within the university, yet my own beliefs are bound to affect the research. The position I take as a feminist will inform how I conduct my research even when it is not explicit.

At the heart of feminist methodology is the issue of power, as illustrated above in the section of feminist epistemology. The next section will discuss issues of power that are not necessarily recognised and show how a feminist approach can help to uncover the structures of power that exist alongside patriarchy and are equally important when discussing how power is exercised.

4.7: Feminism, Foucault and issues of power

I would now like to turn to the work of Michel Foucault and show how his work has been used by feminists to demonstrate that power is not necessarily and exclusively

expressed through patriarchy or a particular social group, and that there are many power struggles in action within this social structure, even down to the individual. The oppressed can also be oppressors and one can also oppress oneself without being conscious of it, using Foucault's analysis. I will explore this issue further in respect of this latter self-oppression and self-surveillance of women, as I found it helpful in trying to understand some of the contradictions that I found in the interviews and other data from the women.

Although Foucault was interested in sexuality (Foucault, 1981) he had little to say about women and gender constructions or feminist issues, and quite often encouraged conflicting readings of his own work, particularly in the later years (1980). Yet his work is often used as a metaphor:

> *A tool box from which the tools might be bent and distorted in ways not envisioned by their creator* (Grimshaw, 1994, p52).

His tools have been used to analyse gender issues, yet he did not do this himself.

Prior to this Foucauldian analysis, it was acknowledged that power was not necessarily overt and the way to keep power was to condition people to accept the 'common sense' view of the way things are, without questioning or challenging them. This view has arisen many times in the interviews. Freire (1972) in particular, challenges this view and attempts to raise the consciousness of oppression and show that there can be a way forward for the oppressed only if they recognise that oppression and understand it for what it is. Freire does

acknowledge that the struggle is continuous, although, unlike Foucault, he does see an end in sight. Lukes gives a clear expression of how power can be manipulated from above:

> *Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?* (Lukes, 1997, p24).

I believe many women feel this way. It is reflected in chapter 2 of this thesis where we see that men and women are educated and conditioned in the 'natural' way for them to behave, according to their gender, and that they have a particular role to play in society as ordained by their sex. However, I do not believe, from my experience as a researcher, that all women are unaware of this, but accept their role because the alternative is either unimaginable or undesirable to a certain extent. This makes resistance difficult, and again highlights my difficulty of not politicising the women I interview. Many women are aware of their oppression but choose to accept it with good humour as the best coping strategy in attaining the education that they felt had been denied them when they were younger. Yet Foucault would challenge this idea of personal autonomy seeing education not as liberatory, but as masking the political nature of that education. He sees educational establishments as just one of many organisational practices, such as prisons,

that are instruments of social control (Marshall, 1996). Because in western democracies, citizens play an active part in government, he suggests that this must be controlled from inside, rather than outside, therefore the discourses, which will be explained below, get internalised by individuals and then guide the population's behaviour as the accepted way to behave. One of these ways is played out through education and in particular for this thesis, the hierarchical structures of a university.

As can be seen from the example above, Foucault demonstrates clearly that power is everywhere and does not emanate solely from a particular social group in a singular way, but is expressed through what he calls 'discourse' (Foucault, 1980). Discourse is not only about speech, such as who said what, but the conditions under which those words can be spoken, the 'truth' of which can only have value within those terms and conditions. So the accepted truth about a particular situation can only have validity within that particular discourse and may be different within each and every discourse. All human activity consists of systems of power relations, and Foucault questions how we have come to accept some things as authoritative, to consent to them and regard them as legitimate and therefore value them above others:

> *Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the*

> *acquisition of truth; the status of those who are*
> *charged with saying what counts as true* (Foucault,
> 1980, p 131).

This is particularly true about the position of women in society, and will be reflected in the discussion later in the thesis. It is much more difficult to resist a discourse of power than it is to resist an event or situation. The latter is usually a resistance or reaction against something than it is an attempt to gain power. There are also 'extra-discursive' relationships (Cain, 1994) which also have power, but they are situations of which we cannot speak about as they have no name, but pre-exist their naming. Cain exemplifies this by using the work of Kelly, who, in 1988 interviewed respondents about sexual violence using the categories of pressurised sex, coerced sex and rape. None of her respondents talked about pressurised sex until it was given the name and then they all recognised it in their own experience, and its pre existence to its possible naming. This analysis shows that there are forces that keep people in place within society whether they are named or not, so are much more difficult to explore and articulate. Foucault illustrates this by what he calls disciplines of power (Foucault, 1979). He used Jeremy Bentham's panopticon as an example of never knowing when one is being observed, not knowing where or when surveillance takes place. People are therefore disciplined to internalise this gaze of power and are constantly aware of their behaviour; consequently they are oppressed by insidious systems of power without necessarily being conscious of them.

Within a feminist framework, then, there are oppressive forces. Using the above analysis, it can be seen that women can and do oppress other women overtly through class, poverty and race. More insidiously, they can oppress each other through the discourse of being women and what it is to be a woman. The most ardent critics of those who reject the norm tend to be other women. Being feminine is not something imposed from above, or from any particular source, therefore it is more difficult to resist. By stereotyping oneself as feminine, one can aid the oppression of this particular disadvantaged group rather than resist it. These stereotypical traits ("women aren't very good at maths", for example) are often internalised, and members of the group thereby legitimise their disadvantage by believing in it, that they cannot be changed, thus they are participating in their own oppression (Foster, Arnt & Honkola, 2004).

However, Judith Bennett, the historian, argues:

> *Women have not been merely passive victims of patriarchy; they have colluded in, undermined and survived patriarchy. But neither have women been free agents, they have always faced ideological, institutional, and practical barriers to equitable association with men (and indeed with other women)* (Bennett, 1989, p 262).

These barriers Bennett highlights can be overt or subtle; patriarchy can be seen as male dominated society where authority is usually reserved for men; male identified where cultural norms are associated with how we think of men and masculinity, and male centred, where the focus of attention is primarily on what men do (Kleinman, 2008). A feminist

researcher would hope to investigate how these aspects play out in the setting of the research and whether the participants challenge them or not, thinking about the language that may be used about issues of equality.

Yet power is still often seen as something to be wrested from men and, for example, a successful business woman will often take on the characteristics of men and take a well paid job in a system that exploits other women at the lower level, but will see herself as emancipated and powerful, a role model for other women. An extreme example of this would be Margaret Thatcher who took on what was generally seen as a male occupation by being like other men, yet was lauded for being Britain's first female Prime Minister, although she did very little for women whilst in post. Thus, not all women feel oppressed by men; they can also have power over men in a number of situations, again through class, race and poverty as well as politics for example.

By drawing together the essence of feminist methodology, and my understanding of the liberating ideas posited by Foucault and Freire, this research methodology aims to create data that will illustrate how the women in the study operate within the higher education arena into which they are entering and how they see themselves in terms of their skills and their values whilst taking this journey. The journey, which also includes me, will take into account life histories before university and their experiences after, as well as within, in order to contextualise their encounter with higher education.

I will now outline how I intend to put these ontological and epistemological assumptions into practice through a discussion of the methods I will use.

4.8: Research methods

A major strength of this thesis is the longitudinal approach and the serial interviews which allow for changes over time and reflective development for both the women interviewed, and for me, the interviewer. The interviews have changed over time, beginning with life history accounts to set the scene and to allow the respondents to think back to why they have arrived at this point of entering higher education after having a break of a number of years. The subsequent interviews have allowed for exploration of what it is like to be a mature woman in higher education and how their skills have developed and been valued.

4.9: The Research Interview within Qualitative Research

The use of the in-depth interview has been discussed previously in terms of its place in feminist methodology. This section will discuss research interviews in terms of method, how they were carried out and the practical considerations involved.

Interviewing is a common and familiar method of eliciting information and many people are familiar with the format, from interviews for jobs, interviews with police or even watching interviews on television (Gillham, 2000; Rafferty, 2004). The research interview, however, is more than just

eliciting information by a question and answer format; it is aimed at creating new knowledge and seeks to understand the real world of the participants in the research in a deep and meaningful way. My interviews are based on my wish to understand and explore with the participants the experience of mature women entering higher education.

Interviewing is not a neutral tool as it is the interviewer who creates the reality of the interview situation. The influence of the personal characteristics of the interviewer in terms of gender, class and race, for example, has been discussed earlier. However, there are a number of other influences that need to be taken into account that can help produce rich data for qualitative research. Gillham (2000) suggests the place where the interview takes place has an effect, that a familiar place for the interviewee can be both comfortable yet may also be inhibiting when that person talks about their own life and circumstances. For my research I gave the women the choice of location, suggesting their homes, my home or a room specifically set aside in the university. Most chose to come to my home for their first interview, others their own home, yet subsequent interviews tended to be at the university once the women felt more at home there, and their time was more limited.

Gillham (2000) also discusses good listening skills which he states are not passive, that interviewers need to encourage their respondents by appropriate facial expressions, nods, eye contact, and tone of voice amongst others. From my experience of interviewing, one of the most powerful tools is allowing space for thinking, and not leaping in to cover silences (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998;

Wengraf, 2001). Silences often produce additional data, as the respondent quietly reflects on what they have just said and adds to it; equally a silence can allow the interviewer to think about the response and ask additional questions based on this response. This also aids what Wengraf (2001) calls 'double-attention' where the interviewer needs to both listen to understand what the respondent is saying and allow them the space to do this but also to have a mind to the topics of the interview and make sure they are covered.

The interview method that I have used is generally known as semi-structured, where a small number of questions are prepared but further questions are improvised according to the response to the initial questions. The precise questions and their order grow from the exchange. This allows for greater depth than other forms of data collection as it allows the interviewer to be responsive and to probe for deeper insights, having greater flexibility and freedom (Cohen & Manion, 1996). The first interviews I conducted were the least structured, basically asking the women to tell me why they were returning to learning at this particular time, and then a general question about their skills. This type of interview reflects the growing interest in using this methodology as a way of understanding women's lives using their own voices and experiences to capture the meaning that they give to their lives (Reinharz, 1992; Oakley, 1981; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Kleinman, 2008). Traditionally, interviewers were advised to be as objective as possible and to deflect questions with responses such as, 'You're the expert' or 'I'm interested in what you think about it' (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Now, using qualitative methodology, interviewers are encouraged to give and take within the

interview, respond and answer questions honestly and to make it more of a real conversation, which can be particularly helpful when both participants are women. This 'sharedness' of meaning will produce data that are morally sound and reliable. The key to this reality is to be aware and accept the subjectivity of the interviewer, based on similarities and differences between participants and to report this in any analysis, and not to make the interviewer appear invisible. The interviewer can never know exactly what another person's reality is, but the sharing of views and checking back with the respondents can produce this shared reality:

> *Interviews are social situations to which both participants bring their own expectations, experiences, and notions of proper behaviour* (Murphy & Dingwall, 2003, p 81).

The first analysis of interviews, which is reported at the end of this chapter, was a continuous process, looking for emergent themes as each round of interviews took place, and which often reflected the literature analysed in chapter 2. The discussion of the findings in chapter 6 was to consolidate the work of others but also to step back and look at what seemed to me to be the contradictions within the data of the ways that the women made sense of their lives and the value placed on their skills in the social world in which their education took place.

4.10: Additional research methods

Other methods have also been used to complement and validate the data obtained from the interviews. Each woman

was given a notebook to use as a reflective diary. I asked them to keep a note of their thoughts as they were progressing through their course, and to note down anything they thought would be useful for future interviews. They were to bring the notebook to subsequent interviews. I made the decision that the notebooks would not form part of my data, and that the women would be able to use the book for their own purposes, only sharing with me what they thought pertinent. I felt that they would write more for themselves rather than for me if they were not showing me their book. Current work on voice shows that when students know their reflections will be seen by the teacher, they write what they think the teacher wants rather than use them for personal reflections (see Hadfield & Haw, 2001 for example).

As the researcher, I also kept a reflective diary, a journal of my thoughts and experiences over the time of data collection. This was also used for field notes after the interviews. I have included extracts from this as part of the analysis and discussion in Chapter 6. Throughout the journey of my thesis, I have kept this research journal/field notes of my own feelings and thoughts about the process of the PhD. Reflection is the key component of the research process, and recording my thoughts straight away has allowed me to be reflective of what was happening at the time and also for me to look back over the time span and reflect on how my thoughts and ideas have changed and developed. In a longitudinal study such as this, it is important to have this type of record to look back upon and see how the study has evolved.

As the journal belongs in the private sphere of the researcher, it has allowed me to articulate my frustrations and well as the successes in a language that only I may read at a later date. This is important because it can allow for possible negative feelings that are recorded at the time that can be explored and considered in a different light at a later date to the advantage of the writer and ultimately to a better understanding of the research process. It becomes an outlet to record feelings that I personally would not want to record elsewhere or share with other people on some of the experiences of interviewing. Sometimes the interviews were upsetting for both participants as the women shared difficult periods of their lives with me, often off tape. This is very draining, and being able to write down such feelings is a useful outlet. Looking back on these feelings at a later date can often affect how one reads the data, and give a deep insight into what was actually recorded as data.

Fowler and Aaron (2004) define a research journal as a way 'to keep track of your activities and ideas during research'. They suggest that researchers should 'always carry index cards, a notebook, or a laptop computer to use as a research journal, a place to record your activities and ideas' (p 607). Whilst I did not use the journal as a diary, writing in it every day, it was more of an ongoing conversation with myself, and many of the entries are questions raised rather than 'what happened today?' The close proximity to the present, that is, immediately after an event, keeps the closeness of the experience to the recording of that experience; hence the diary entries are less subject to the vagaries of memory (Elliott, 1997). However, Elliott also discusses that diary entries are not subject to retrospective censorship or

reframing. Yet I would argue that for me, that was their very purpose, for me to write exactly what I thought and felt at the time, in an honest way, and that I would consider these thoughts and feeling in order to apply them later to my research journey, and the record of it.

There is a strong tradition of autobiographical and diary-based research within the feminist paradigm and there has been a growth of interest in auto/biography (Stanley 1991). As I was only writing the journal for myself, I was able to record feelings that perhaps I would not have recorded if there was another reader in view. I think this was why when I asked my participants to keep diaries, that it was to be an *aide memoire* for them to inform their interviews with me, and that they could have the same freedom of expression as I. The interviews would be a more formal way of putting forward their views as they knew they were going to be recorded, used for my thesis and then were going to have their own copies of the transcripts as a record of their own HE journey. I deliberately chose not to ask the women to show me their diaries, but rather to explain how I thought they should be used.

Finally, I was able to observe meetings, access data, and attend some sessions relating to the aforementioned project, *Embedding Key Skills in a Traditional University*. The three schools from which my respondents came were part of a university wide project attempting to embed key skills in their curricula, each in a different way. This project was explored in more detail in chapter 3, but it needs to be noted here because it was part of my data collection. I was able to see first hand what the participants would be doing in terms of

skills development. For example, I was able to attend a session where students were doing a skills audit and the women from my study kept theirs and discussed it with me as part of one of their interviews with me. I was also able to attend meetings of the steering group of the project and was party to discussions on how the schools were implementing their strategies.

In summary, I have used reflective diaries as well as longitudinal in- depth interviews, and field notes to add to the data, together with the information from the reflective diaries of the participants, and the experience from the *Embedding Key Skills in a Traditional University* project. I will now explore the ethical and moral responsibilities that face all researchers, and how these ethical principles have informed my work in relation to data collection. Questions of validity are often raised concerning the use of interviewing as the main source of data collection (for example, Kitwood, 1993; Robotham, 2004; Hammersley, 2003) with issues such as bias on the part of the interviewer and the way questions may be formed in order to test pre-conceived ideas. I will explore below, notions of validity, reliability and ethics in terms of this research.

4.11: Validity

Validity is not a single fixed or universal concept, but rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects (Winter, 2000, p1).

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It can thus be seen that validity can have a range of meanings according to and relative to a person's belief system. Qualitative research seeks to understand people's interpretations of the world from an insider's viewpoint - the reality that people perceive as such. Theories and further questions are evolved from data as they are collected and analysed, seeking a wider understanding of the situation. The human person is the primary collection instrument.

Although a robust methodology, qualitative research cannot claim to be an exact science because one is studying human reactions within a social context rather than an experiment in a laboratory. There is nothing to be measured here as one would in a scientific experiment. In qualitative research there are no particular statistical tests and measures to use; there is usually no hypothesis. The validity of qualitative research lies with the representation of the participants, the purpose of the research and the appropriateness of the research instrument. Attempts to generalise and to apply results to other populations can seriously hinder its overall validity. Understanding is more important than validity for the qualitative researcher.

A common criticism of qualitative research is that the very subjectivity of the inquiry leads to difficulties in establishing reliability and validity as it is very difficult to prevent or detect researcher bias, and that its scope tends to be limited to in-depth interviews. This is more difficult to address in a PhD thesis as the researcher is usually just one person, and although this thesis relies on a number of in-depth interviews over time, it is complemented by additional methods as already discussed.

Validity is usually applied to quantitative research to the extent to which conclusions drawn are plausible and trustworthy, and defensible when challenged. Validity is whether one's research explains or measures what it set out to explain. That is, the appropriateness of the method to the research question. There are a number of ways in which validity can be ensured which I have addressed in my thesis.

It is important to be clear at the beginning about the research question and to have it in an unambiguous form. One needs to demonstrate a strong scholarly knowledge of what has gone before and the ways in which other researchers have examined the broad research area within which this one is situated. I show validity by the literature review and how much it reflects the findings from the data in chapter 5.

Another way is 'respondent validation' by showing to the participants excerpts from my interpretations of the data. This happened through the transcripts and discussions with the participants before and after the interviews, to check with them. To maintain validity of the research I recorded accurately what was told to me, and presented it back to the interviewees in written form before the next interview. This is similar to the method used by Skeggs (1994) who tape recorded interviews and then played them back with the women and allowed them to respond to the tape, which helped her with the analysis and the interpretation she had already made herself. I began analysing the first interviews before moving on to the second, wherever possible, and this again helped to inform further interviews. However, Holland and Razamanoglu disagree, saying that feminist researchers

can only explain why they make the interpretations that they do, and this may be beyond the interviewees' experience in terms of the complexities and contradictions that may occur. The interviewer may also interpret silences and absences in the data, which cannot easily be corroborated with the participants. This may raise the question as to how much should the interviewees be expected to participate in the researcher's analysis and interpretation of the data? Whilst it is valid to conform with participants that their views are being interpreted fairly and accurately, Acker *et al* (1983) wanted their participants to locate their experience in relation to that of other participants and were surprised at the resistance they faced from the women, who had said they were happy to be interviewed and then trusted the interviewers to represent them fairly. Nevertheless, primary data in the form of quotations from the interviews and the researcher's notes are shown throughout the following chapters. Thus, corroboration did take place between the researcher and the researched, and as far as possible was validated with the respondents. Triangulation by using more than one researcher (Bryman, 2008) is not possible in this case, as all the interviews were done by me, although sometimes I did group interviews where views were shared.

Using a small number of participants and concentrating on a few for the main study enables the researcher to focus less on generalisations and more on understanding the particulars of that particular case in its complexity (Haggis 2006). Nevertheless, Cohen and Manion (1996) suggest that a single interview where the respondent may want to present themselves in a good light or to 'help' the researcher by answering the right way, may be partially neutralised by

repeated interviews. The fact that the interviewer and interviewees study and work in the same university and come across each other apart from during the interviews helps to develop a better understanding and a more honest relationship.

Cohen and Manion (1996) also suggest that in order for interview data to be valid, the amount of bias should be minimised, such as the attitudes and opinions of the interviewer, a tendency for the interviewer to see the interviewee in their own image, to seek answers to preconceived notions, misconceptions on what the respondent is saying and mistakes about what the respondent thinks is being asked. Being as remote and objective as possible in an interview situation, would then decrease the validity of the data. The whole point of an interview (or inter-view as Kvale (1996) and Schostak (2003) prefer to call it) is to generate some kind of empathy and shared understanding of a situation and to put both participants at ease so that information will be disclosed that is not a calculated response to the questions. There needs to be a relationship between two human people for rich data to emerge. Stanley & Wise (1983) describe objectivity as:

> *an excuse for a power relationship as obscene as the power relationship that leads women to be sexually assaulted, murdered and otherwise treated as mere objects. The assault on our minds, the removal from existence of our experiences as valid and true, is every bit as questionable* (p 169).

The validity of experiences, they argue, should replace the male-dominated versions of objectivity. They argue that the purpose of research is not to accumulate knowledge but to use that knowledge to emancipate women. I have been candid about my own experience and all the women interviewed knew I had a similar experience to them a few years previously. There was no covert hiding of my own subjectivity.

The desire to understand and categorise others is one of power and control. The researcher can often act unconsciously as the omniscient or impartial voice. Foucault (1980) defines truth through discourse, 'discourse of truth', he uses unisubjective truth as one which is entirely personal to the subject. Intersubjective truth is a commonly accepted truth between people. Therefore if a multiplicity of truths exists, then there cannot be any commonality of validity. Therefore, according to Foucault, the research we do is through the truth that is available to us. Therefore the validity here is more about whether the truth of the data echoes the social constructs.

Cano (2006) defends qualitative research in terms of validity thus:

> *In all cases, all interpretations are subjective. This is entirely acceptable within the qualitative research tradition as you cannot separate your own feelings and opinions from the research question and the data. Some sources of recording data allow for specific ways of increasing the reliability of interpretations, for example, if you are doing document analysis, you might*

give a selected portion of text to other researchers within your team and ask them to interpret your text. You can then count the degree of agreement of the different interpretations by different researchers in your team. However, not all qualitative methods are conducive to this type of double checking, and in many cases, the analysis based on observations will be entirely sui generic (p 4).

Finally, Miller & Dingwall (1997) suggest these criteria for judging the validity of a piece of research:

- Can one distinguish clearly between data and analysis?
- Has the study taken into account contradictory or negative evidence?
- Are statements proposed on theoretical grounds tested on the literature from previous studies?
- Does it reflect the interactive character of society and deal even-handedly with the participants?

I will strive to address these questions throughout the thesis as I attempt to present a robust analysis of my data and develop my thesis argument. The following section will discuss reliability, which, as will be shown, is closely tied to validity in a qualitative study such as this.

4.12: Reliability

Reliability and validity are tools of an essentially positivist epistemology. While they may have proved useful in providing checks and balances for quantitative methods, they sit uncomfortably in research of this kind, which is better concerned by questions about

> *power and influence, adequacy and efficiency, suitability and accountability'* (Watling as cited in Simco & Warin 1997).

Watling is concentrating more on the deep richness of qualitative data, that, in its very essence, does not seek to be replicated in another situation, as the situation where the research is taking place is unique, based on the factors mentioned above. Critiques of the unreliability of qualitative research suggest that the use of multiple methods increases the reliability of the research. However, how certain can one be that another researcher using the same research instrument (the interview questions) will arrive at the same conclusions or sway the interviewee one way or the other, as the strength of the method relies on the interaction between two individuals in the interview situation and the relationship between the two individuals? As Bryman suggests (2008), it is not really possible to replicate a qualitative study as the social setting and circumstances will never be the same. Yet, the strength of this type of work is that by accepting that the research is taking place in a specific time and place and that it cannot be replicated does not take away its reliability.

In terms of both validity and reliability, Guba and Lincoln (1994) do not separate the two, but give the following criteria which do not take quantitative research criteria to try and fit qualitative research into it. This new approach highlights the problems of defining qualitative research as what it is not rather than what it is when comparing to quantitative. Guba and Lincoln use the terms trustworthiness and authenticity, which I feel fits better for research that is not seeking absolute truth and that seeks to understand how the women

experience their lives in the social setting that is not neutral. Trustworthiness does reflect the section above on validity, looking at:

- respondent validation, where researchers accept that there are several possible accounts of social reality

- transferability, where they refer to Geertz's thick description concept which can provide details of a culture that others may be able to look at and see if the findings can be transferred. Small qualitative studies tend to look at a small sample whose members share some characteristics, in my case, women entering higher education as mature students

- dependability where the researcher keeps records of all work undertaken, including how the research was designed, how the data sample was selected, and how the theoretical inferences have been justified, so that peers can audit their work

- confirmability where the auditor can see that the researcher has acted in good faith and not allowed their own subjectivity and feelings to sway the data.

Authenticity is more philosophical and is more about fairness and the impact of the research on the participants, which was something I investigated in the section on doing feminist research on non-feminist women. Guba & Lincoln (1994) suggest the following criteria as a check for fairness:

- Ontological authenticity: does it help the participants to arrive at a better understanding of their social world?

- Educative authenticity: does it help the participants see the perspective of others in their social setting?

- Catalytical authenticity: has it acted as an impetus for social change?

- Tactical authenticity: has it empowered the members to take steps to engage in change?

This typology seems to offer more scope for qualitative, and most particularly the section on authenticity fits well with the feminist approach, although, as I have discussed above, I do have reservations on the impact upon the participants of my study because of the sensitive nature of the topic, where women are being asked to reflect on their education as children and the reasons for them returning to education as adults. I feel the impact of the research will have different meaning to each participant. Bringing about social change for a group is different to individual empowerment, and this empowerment may manifest itself in different ways and at different times for the participants. Participants will have contributed to making visible a social issue; they will have had the opportunity to reflect upon their own life experience with the interviewer, both of which may make the person act, and it may empower the interviewer, too. Even if the research does not impact directly on the participants, it may change things for people in the future, and be worthwhile.

4.13: Ethics

In all research, participants need to be protected from harm, and ethical guidelines need to be set at the very beginning of any project to ensure participants are protected. It is generally accepted that the issue of ethics is an integral part of any research process. Following the British Educational Research Association's guidelines (1992, since revised 2004), my ethical guidelines sought to cover a number of areas. A set of these can be found in Appendix IV. BERA's guidelines begin:

> *The British Educational Research Association believes that all educational research should be conducted with an ethic of respect for persons, respect for knowledge, respect for democratic values, and respect for the quality of educational research* (1992, p1).

A number of key areas that I sought to cover in my ethical guidelines concerned the rights of the participants in terms of recruitment, consent, anonymity, confidentiality, research relationship, the right to withdraw and other factors that might impact upon them as participants (see for example Rafferty, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Wengraff, 2004; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Putting these into practice then, I sent a copy of my ethical guidelines with the letter of introduction to all my potential participants. On our first meeting I went through them with each woman, explaining the purpose of the research, how the material gained from the interviews would be stored and to what purpose I would be using their responses. As

mentioned above, each interview was transcribed and given to each participant before a subsequent interview, and I agreed to change any anomalies if necessary.

In order to protect their privacy, I asked each woman to provide me with a pseudonym which would be used when reporting the findings. I could not guarantee them complete anonymity as people who knew them may read the thesis, but this was explained and accepted by all. Only two women did not wish to choose their own pseudonym so I chose it for them. All the participants will be given access to the completed thesis.

The distinction between anonymity as shown above and confidentiality needs to be clarified here (Wengraf, 2004). Confidentiality is more concerned with what one cannot use in any form, and is often information imparted either before a tape recorded interview begins, or possibly when it has been switched off. This happened on a number of occasions to a greater or lesser degree, and as the researcher, there is an onus on respecting what one knows and what one can ethically include in the thesis. This was also discussed and checked with the participants in the debriefing sessions.

The issue of the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee has already been discussed earlier in this chapter, but it may be useful here to acknowledge the ethical concerns of drawing out possible painful memories and the harm this may cause the participants. Scraton (2004) has worked mainly with those who have suffered in the aftermath of trauma, but his analysis touches upon the possible

unexpected stories that participants may recount, and how they need to be handled with care:

> *Revisiting deeply sensitive issues is always an emotional and often painful experience. In encouraging people to recall and reflect, researchers have to be prepared for unexpected disclosures and, occasionally, personal discoveries brought on through participation. Disclosure and discovery are not necessarily empowering and can emphasise vulnerability. Critical researchers should be accountable for handling a process that requests traumatised participants to relive their suffering* (2004, p190).

As part of the series of interviews with participants, I devised a questionnaire asking about their experience of being interviewed for this thesis (See Appendix V). They were given the choice of providing a written reply, or an interview to discuss the issues raised in the questionnaire. One of the questions was 'Do you think the ethical guidelines were followed?' The response to this question and others is analysed and discussed in chapter 6.

At this point, I will present the members of the cohort who have been the participants in my study, and set out how I went about selecting the volunteers.

4.14: The cohort

As already stated, the aim of the research is to look at the experience of women returning to learning after a period away from compulsory schooling, and who would therefore

have had a life experience away from education. They will have developed a number of life skills, which may have included paid work, voluntary work and home work, and, for a number of them, bringing up children. I therefore targeted mature women applicants to Central University who were over 25 years of age. Although the 'official' HEFCE definition of mature students is 21, I felt that maybe these women would not have such a wide life experience of those over 25.

I was also involved at this time with a project within the University of looking at the way in which certain departments embedded key skills in their curriculum. I felt it would be useful to this study to use participants who were also undertaking a course of key skills, whether it was explicit or implicit.

The group was self selecting as I contacted all the women over 25 years of age who had applied to Central University in the year that I wished to recruit volunteers, and agreed to interview all who replied. Details of this cohort are shown below. They were from the schools of Sociology and Social Policy, English studies, and Education (Post Graduate Certificate of Education). I was also able to interview some women who were already studying here and this acted as a pilot study. These interviews were conducted before the main cohort.

Below is a short biography of the women based upon their first contact with me. Some of the women will feature more strongly than others in the discussion chapter, and so further details of them will appear later in the thesis. The study is mostly about gender and age, but other factors are taken into

account when raised by the participants. Class was often a defining characteristic for some. One participant is black, another was a white woman married to a black man, and these issues were discussed when the women felt they were important. I cannot claim that these issues were explored in great detail, but they have been mentioned in the biographies below where relevant.

4.15: Pilot Interviews

Belinda

Belinda, single, began her English degree when she was 43, after struggling with the death of a friend and her own alcoholism. University gave her an identity and a sense of selfhood. She struggled financially but completed her studies. She is now taking a Masters Degree part time and receives support from her local church.

Pam

Pam moved in to the area with her husband and went to the local college where she studied GCSEs and then access. She feels that she was pushed into the access course and would have preferred to do A-Levels. She was offered places at university to study English and again felt she was pushed into this as she hated reading and writing, but liked the theory. She worked hard but the pressure was too much and she suspended for a year. Realistically she felt she wouldn't return and planned to do Spanish and sewing at college. She thinks she is capable but got carried away by others' enthusiasm and should have taken it at her own pace.

Eunice

Eunice is 39, with one child, and has just completed a degree in Environmental Science and English at another university in the city. Whilst studying she obtained Key Skills L4 in three categories. She feels this has been useful in learning to acknowledge her own skills developed through life both in and out of university.

Colleen and Sharon

Colleen and Sharon are first year students studying English in the year before the main cohort in this study. They both came through the access route, but from different colleges. Colleen has two children aged 10 & 11, Sharon has three children, aged 6, 8 & 9. They wanted to be interviewed together. They felt there was some support for mature students when they started, but it needed changing.

Lavinia

Lavinia was interviewed once after the main cohort had been at university for a year. She was keen to take part in the research and was currently on an access course when I interviewed her, but I was not able to continue with the interviews, so she is placed under the pilot participants as her experience once at university is not recorded. Lavinia is black, her parents were from Jamaica, and she herself has five children. She studied on the access course at the same time as one of her sons.

4.16: The Main cohort

4.16.1: School of English

Francesca

Francesca is a single parent with two children, aged seven and eighteen months. She is also disabled in that she cannot walk or stand for any length of time. She always wanted to act but her parents would not allow this and so she has worked in retail as a training manager for a number of years. She studied through an access course and will read English at university. She felt that turning forty was a big turning point for her, and this motivated her to return to study.

Yasmin

Yasmin left school at 15, without completing her GCSEs and became a model, spending some time in America. On returning, she went to her local college with a view to an eventual degree in Business Studies. This did not work out as she failed most of her first year modules as she didn't enjoy the topics, so she took a job for a short time and then applied to Central University to study English. She is 25, and very concerned to be accepted by and to fit in with the younger students. She intends to live at home, and drive in every day from a town about 30 miles away and also work a couple of days a week.

Wendy

Wendy is 53, she has worked all her life as a secretary. Her husband and grown up children have degrees and she felt it was her turn, particularly because of her age. She intends to treat her university course like a nine to five job. She has

chosen English studies because she enjoys reading, but also enjoys the origins and history of the language. She will drive from home every day, which is about 25 miles from the university.

Anya

Anya is 51 and has six children, some of whom still live at home. She has a husband who suffers from depression. She became interested in education through helping her children and decided she needed something for herself. She left school at 15 so had no formal qualifications so she attended her local college to study on access. The decision to attend university was not popular at home, especially as it is about 25 miles away and she would be travelling by train. She was very awed to gain a place at Central University and eventually deferred for a year even though she had excellent marks for her access course. She enjoyed critical theory on her course and will be reading English at university.

4.16.2: School of Sociology and Social Policy

Carmen

Carmen is 40, married with three children, aged four, six and eight. She attended a local college access course and will read Social Policy at university. She has never worked since having the children, but prior to that worked in retail in selling, buying and then computer operations for a large department store in London. Her main concerns about university are financial and juggling family commitments. Her family are supportive of her decision and are willing to help. She wants a career after university and was initially thinking of primary teaching but is open to new ideas.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is 44 and was educated to O-Level standard but was not able to continue with her education as her father did not agree with educating girls. This was something she always regretted as she thought she was capable of getting a degree. She has spent a lot of time in the home sphere, caring for her children and her parents. She has three children who are now grown up and her daughter suggested she tried for university. She studied on access at Central University's adult education centre and thus came to university straight into the second year. She is reading Social and Cultural Studies. She is very nervous and anxious about attending university, but feels that with the support of her friend Sasha, they will go through it together.

Sasha

Sasha is 56 and was sent to boarding school when she was ten when her father died. She felt this affected her adversely and she left school early and went into nursing. She has previously completed an Open University Foundation Course which she enjoyed. Her three sons are grown up, and have completed their degrees. She lives with her husband, and decided to enrol on the access course out of interest where she met Elizabeth. They have worked together and become friends, so Sasha decided to continue to university as well.

Rebecca

Rebecca is 40, married with one teenage son. She will be reading Sociology part time at university. She feels that she is here by default and refuses to look further forward than her first year. She went to her local college to study something

that interested her and found herself on an access course. She wasn't really sure what it was until she had been on the course for a few months, as she had joined a month late. She has worked previously in part time work as a care assistant.

Suzanne

Suzanne moved to the area from London for a fresh start after a very difficult life. She is 42, a single parent with two children aged six and four. She is white; the children's father is black. She attended an access course in Humanities in this city for one year, and then started Social Policy at university. She chose this because she felt it reflected her life experience and felt she wasn't good at writing, preferring a more vocal contribution. It was discovered during her first year at university that she is dyslexic.

4.16.3: School of Education

Ruth

Ruth is 35, married with two children, the youngest who has just started school, so has been at home for seven years. She has a degree in Maths and Psychology and an MSc in operational research. She had a very well paid and prestigious job which she gave up for moral reasons. Whilst at home with the children she has been involved in their education and has decided to a PGCE in Maths as she has enjoyed the experience of working in education, and wants a career that would stretch her, even though the pay is not good.

Judy

Judy is 35, married with three young children. She originally gained a Law degree, but felt pressured by her family to succeed in her solicitor's finals and gave it up, taking menial jobs to bring herself down to earth from the people she had been mixing with, who she calls 'Hooray Henrys'. She tried again for her solicitor's exams years later but walked out of her finals and decided to take control and not be pressured by family. She went to live in France, has since returned and is starting a PGCE in French.

Sarah

Sarah is 31, married with three children; the youngest has just started school. Sarah has a degree in Maths and Computer Science, but started a family straight after finishing her degree and has been at home full time since. She now wants to teach so is just beginning a Maths PGCE. This is something she has always wanted to do.

Jenny

Jenny is in her thirties, and married. She has a degree in French and has a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFEL) qualification which enabled her to teach abroad. She is currently working at Central University in an administrative role and will go on to do PGCE in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). She does not necessarily want to teach but feels a teaching qualification will give her more scope in a future career.

4.17: The process of the interviews

This section provides a link between the methodology and analysis by describing how the interviews were carried out, and a little more information on the women. The data were analysed after each series of interviews in order to identify themes for subsequent chronological interviews whilst keeping within the broad framework of skills. As this was a longitudinal study, I was able to reflect with the participants on their previous interviews, and discuss my own analysis with them. This ongoing analysis was helpful in identifying what was important to the women and also helped with the final analysis presented in the next chapter.

Firstly, a table is presented on the following page to show the number and dates of the interviews with the thirteen main participants:

Table 4.1: List of interviews with main cohort

School	1st Life history	2nd Pre-entry	3rd After first few months	4th Additional interviews during course	5th Reflections on being interviewed	6th After completion of course
English						
Anya	June 98	-	-	-	-	Sep 05
Francesca	June 98	Sept. 98	Nov. 98	March 99 July 99	Oct 99	
Wendy	Sep. 98	-	Feb 99	Sep 99	Nov 99	
Yasmin	Sep. 98	-	Nov 98	-	-	
Sociology						
Carmen	June 98	Sept. 98	Dec 98	April 99	Oct 99	Oct 05
Rebecca	July 98	Sept. 98	Jan. 99	August 99		
Elizabeth	June 98	Sept. 98	-	-	-	
Sasha	June 98		Oct 98	-	-	
Susanne	Sept. 98	-	Dec 98	March 99	Nov 99	
PGCE						
Sarah	Aug 98	Sept. 98	Nov 98	April 99	Nov 99	August 99 August 05
Ruth	July 98	Sept. 98	Dec 98	-		August 99
Jenny	Aug 98	Sep 98	-	May 99	Nov 99	August 99 August 05
Judy	Aug 98	Sept 98	Nov 98	-	Oct 99	Sep 99

4.17.1: First Interviews

Between July and September 1998, thirteen initial in depth interviews were conducted with the participants. These interviews were planned to be fairly open where I asked the participants to relate their educational and life experiences that had led them to return to study at this particular moment in their lives. I also asked about their own perception of their skills, what they felt they were bringing to their course, what skills they thought they might need and what skills they hoped to develop over the period of their studies, and how they felt they had prepared for higher education.

Before the interviews began, I briefly stated my own position that I had returned to learning myself as a mature student, but that I would like to hear their views first on the recorded interview, and that if they wished to ask me any questions afterwards, I would be happy to try to answer them from my own experience. I did not want the interviews, or the project as a whole, to be seen as counselling or myself as advice-giver, particularly to the prospective undergraduates. I did not tell the PGCE students beforehand that I also teach part time. If asked about my experience, I would answer honestly, but always try to stress that everyone's experience was different, and that my own experience was from a different discipline and a different time, before the advent of access courses. Because of the methodology I have chosen, I did not want to be 'the one who knows', but I did also want to share in the experiences and expectations which did often reflect my own. (Finch, 1984; Millen, 1997; Mies, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). I wanted to be empathetic without being patronising (Oakley, 1981).

Before I began this research, I had a view of women returners based on my own experience and that of my contemporaries at university, and also from work that I had done in 1996 (Wallis and Mallia) interviewing women returning to learning in further education colleges. The women from this latter study were not all planning to proceed to higher education, so the participants in this thesis must be viewed in a different light. My view was a rather stereotypical one, reflected also in much of the literature of the time (see Chapter 2), of women who had bad educational experiences at school, who then went into low paid employment until they left work to raise families, and now that their children were older, they felt the need to make up for lost time and 'better' themselves.

Some of the thirteen women volunteers had given up full and part time paid work in order to study, and at least three would be working in paid employment up until the beginning of their first term; others hope to continue working on a part time basis if at all feasible. With two exceptions, all the women had children, whose ages ranged from babies to adults. By the end of the study, one of the latter had two children.

This first round of interviews highlighted the diversity of the sample that had volunteered for my study, and the wide variety of motives for their return to higher education. This sample depended upon volunteers as I wrote to all the mature students in the three schools and I have gratefully interviewed all who replied. During the interviews, I had a schedule of issues I wished to raise, but I tried not to ask too

many questions, relying on the women to take the lead in what was important to them (See discussion on qualitative interviewing in chapter 2, including Cohen & Manion, 1994; Murphy & Dingwall, 2003; Bryman, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1994). The interviewees were given control of the tape recorder, so that they could switch it off at any time, particularly if the information was distressing and they did not want this to be part of the research, but was important that they tell me. This is highlighted particularly in Skeggs' (1994) work when she experienced personal and sometimes distressing disclosures in her interviews with women.

The first interviews were intended to be focused mainly on life history so that I could build up a picture of their educational experience, and any other information that they felt was relevant to making sense of their world and the way they saw themselves as embarking upon a new period of their lives. By using life history interviewing, I was hoping for the 'thick description' which would help me to understand how they contextualised their experiences and feelings (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In order to analyse the data, I transcribed all the interviews, and coded them according to the emerging themes which I felt were relevant to this research. Whilst I had a number of themes in mind, I was open to other categories. Once I had identified the themes, I was able to use these to inform the second round of interviews, where some ideas were followed up in more detail and also to check back with the respondents when I gave them the transcript of their first interview.

4.17.2: Second interviews

The second round of interviews was timed for approximately a week before the women were due to start their course at university. The focus for these interviews was intended to be slightly different, more on skills than life history, and an additional means of data collection was introduced.

Prior to their second interview, each participant was provided with a transcript of the first interview so that they could remove or amend any information given, and would also allow them to be reminded of what they had talked about in the initial interview. The transcripts of the first interviews were to be used as a basis for discussion for the second interviews in order to clarify issues or to study them in more depth in the light of the reading and analysis that I had been doing since the first interviews and also for the women to change or clarify anything from the information they had given me. I intended to explore in more depth the concept of skills and to ask about how the women had been preparing for university since we last spoke. It was at this point that I intended to introduce the idea of them keeping a diary to inform future interviews and I gave them all notebooks for this purpose. The importance of reflective diary keeping has already been discussed earlier in this chapter.

4.17.3: Third interviews

As can be seen from the above table 4.1, the third interviews took place three months into their course and I was able to interview eight of the women in some detail about their attitude to and experience of key skills so far in their course. Two women were unavailable for interview at that time, and

two others had withdrawn from their course at university all together (Sasha and Elizabeth). Before the interviews I had specifically asked all of them to bring along any notes or information they had been given concerning key skills with a view to focusing on that when we talked, as they should all have been asked to conduct a skills audit as their respective schools were participating in the key skills development project discussed in chapter three. In addition, the PGCE students would have spent half term week in the university and have done individual and group work on key skills, and the social studies undergraduates had a lecture on key skills which I was able to attend.

4.17.4: Subsequent interviews

After the third interviews, four of the participants had completed their PGCE, but agreed to give a further interview during the summer before they began teaching in earnest. By the time of these interviews in August and early September, all four had got positions as teachers in secondary schools, and were about to start, so the interviews focused mainly on their experience of key skills during their PGCE and what skills they thought they had developed over the time they were working both in schools and the university.

The remaining four undergraduates, Francesca and Wendy in English and Carmen and Rebecca in Sociology were interviewed again in the second year of their course, Francesca three times, Carmen twice, the others once each, and provided further data on their experience at university and their skills development. Because of the longitudinal nature of this research, I was fortunately able to contact all

the participants after they had all completed their courses, and four agreed to be interviewed about what they were currently doing in terms of employment.

4.18: Summary

This chapter began by exploring the competing philosophical approaches of interpretavist and positivist research, showing how the former was most appropriate for this thesis, although the value of both was acknowledged. In particular, the value of context and experience was discussed, and the meaning that participants gave to those experiences. Feminist epistemology was then explained, as to who creates knowledge and whether there can be a particular feminist epistemology. The main focus was then a discussion of what feminist methodology is, where women are put at the centre of the research, and showing how feminist had evolved from a liberal feminism to a more fragmented post modern view of women and ways of researching their experience. Using Paulo Freire's work on oppression, I showed how this could be used as a tool to name the oppression of women in order to seek social justice and empowerment, and how feminists have used his work in this way. I then discussed my own ontological position and how issues of power and shared experiences impacted upon me, as a woman, interviewing other women, and the degree to which they might consider themselves feminist, and the difficulties this might present. Challenges to feminist methodology were discussed, again in respect to the power situation between interviewer and interviewee, which I suggested shifts during the course of the interview rather than one dominating the other. More internalised issues of power were developed using Foucault's

work, particularly his ideas on hidden discourses and governmentality.

The section on research methods concentrated mostly on how semi-structured interviews were used, over time, and explored the literature on interviewing, its strengths and weaknesses; the use of reflective diaries for both the women and me, and the additional research methods I used to complement the interviews such as observing some seminars with the participants, reviewing their key skills self assessment forms with them and attending meetings for the Key Skills project. The final section discussed validity and reliability, where I used Guba and Lincoln's (1994) typology of trustworthiness and authenticity to demonstrate how reliable and valid this research is, and also discussed the ethical guidelines that I gave to each participant, based on BERA's own guidelines. The cohort was then briefly introduced and a chart showing the frequency of interviews was presented as part of a short linking section of how the interviews were linked to each other and thus informed subsequent questions and areas for dialogue.

Chapter 5: Analysis of the participants' lived experience of higher education

5.0: Introduction

This chapter will present an analysis of the data, using the typology suggested by Harris and Brooks (1998), to identify the challenges that mature women face in higher education. Other factors not covered by this typology will then be outlined. Firstly, Harris and Brooks' typology is explained, and then the data from my study are analysed using the categories set out in table 5.1 which is a summary of the typology. At this point, I will re-introduce the overarching area for investigation for the research in order to re-establish the context in which the subsequent data analysis takes place. Later in this chapter, I will re-introduce the sub-divisions of this area for investigation, and show how the data fit into them. After each section, the findings relating to the sub-divisions will be shown.

I would like to understand more about how some mature women students experience higher education.

5.1: Harris and Brooks' typology

In their article, *Challenges for older students in higher education* (1998), Harris and Brooks use a typology to identify the barriers that might stand in the way of academic achievement and potential success at university. This article was discussed in chapter 2, and sets out what the authors refer to as institutional, situational and dispositional constraints facing older students. Their survey was questionnaire based and 209 undergraduates replied. The

categories by which they analysed their data are outlined in table 5.1 at the end of this section.

This typology is extremely useful as a framework to use in the analysis of my data because it mirrors existing findings in the literature. However, it does not always enable me to reveal the full complexity of my findings, so I will follow the themes as much as possible, and then offer a critique of the typology, showing how I have adjusted the categories to meet the needs of my data. The main difference is between the nature of the two investigations. Harris and Brooks' study was more quantitative, and was based upon questionnaire responses to fifty questions, thus making it easier to fit the responses into the categories. My study, on the other hand, is qualitative and this makes it more difficult to categorise the data into discrete individual categories. Harris and Brooks do recognise this difficulty in their own work, and give the example of stress-inducing conflicts that could fit all three categories:

> *It is often difficult to categorise potential barriers into one and only one category, for example, perceptions of the reactions of other students in classes could be viewed as institutional, situational and/or dispositional. Feelings of stress engendered by role conflicts and time conflicts could also be viewed as reflecting all three types of influences* (p 227).

Thus the categories could overlap or may be viewed differently by different people when coding the data.

The second difference in the two studies concerns the purpose of each. Harris and Brooks sought to compare how well older students were coping with academic life compared

to younger students, in order to identify any potential problems which would then inform their institution's policy as the student body became more diverse in its age population. The focus was therefore on obstacles to progression and so their questionnaire was developed accordingly. The purpose of my study is to understand more about the experience of mature women in higher education, and whilst many obstacles were identified, this was not the main focus. The main focus of my study was the skills that mature women bring to higher education, how they valued these skills and how they felt their skills were valued by the university. This focus is explored more fully below. Harris and Brooks do acknowledge the issue of obstacles and acknowledge that for some, obstacles could be seen as 'invigorating challenges which can lead to triumphs' (Harris & Brooks, 1998, p 227). I will briefly discuss how Harris and Brooks define their categories and then use these categories for the analysis of my data.

- **Institutional constraints**

Harris and Brooks define institutional constraints as:

> *Those which are connected with the college or university itself, such as problems with financial aid, advisement or faculty* (Harris and Brooks, 1998 p 226).

This is very much about the barriers students encounter when trying to access higher education, particularly when services are designed for a particular client group - the younger student rather than the mature student who may have different needs. As well as practical problems such as affordable childcare not being available on campus or

travelling difficulties because of living at home rather than on campus, other considerations such as being taken seriously by tutors and feeling that their contributions are being valued are included here. One of the questions on the Harris and Brooks survey specifically asked about discrimination by tutors because of the age of the student.

- **Situational constraints**

Harris and Brooks define situational constraints as:

> *Those associated with one's current life situation such as child-care problems, job pressures or lack of spousal support* (Harris and Brooks, 1998, p 226).

These constraints are connected with managing other commitments as well as studying, as many students struggle to balance domestic, financial and intellectual demands upon their time. These can be both practical as well as emotional and include how supportive families and friends are of their decision to return to learning. Further pressure may ensue from the financial constraints put upon them by perhaps having given up a job in order to study, along with the extra expenses such as travelling, buying books and other necessary items for their courses. Harris and Brooks found that women were far more likely to mention family demands as a stressor than the male students in their survey (p 227).

- **Dispositional constraints**

Harris and Brooks define dispositional obstacles as:

> *Those related to one's self-perception or attitude, such as lack of self-confidence, lack of commitment, fear of change, or feelings of guilt because of being in school (1998, p 226).*

This section looks more deeply into how people feel about themselves, and their self-confidence. For many mature students, their self-esteem is often thought to be quite low when they begin studying, and these constraints can have an adverse effect upon their studies. Harris and Brooks posed questions about confidence and negativity in their questionnaire such as whether students are assertive enough to get what they wanted on campus, and whether they felt too old to learn. This category can also include feelings of guilt at studying so late in life and of perhaps taking places at university away from younger students, as well as guilt at putting domestic responsibilities aside in order to pursue their own studies.

On the following page is a table summarizing the typology of barriers to academic achievement, giving examples cited by Harris and Brooks to illustrate the categories.

Table 5.1: Harris and Brooks' typology

Typology	Definition	Examples
Institutional	Factors linked to the institution of higher education	• Inconvenient class times or locations • Inadequate campus childcare • Limited financial aid • Irrelevant or uninteresting courses • Transport problems • Admission difficulties • Lack of appropriate counseling • Age-inappropriate student services • Professors who treat adult students as adolescents & fail to value life experience
Situational	Factors linked to one's current life situation	• Child-care problems • Job pressures and economic strains • Lack of spousal support • Time pressure
Dispositional	Factors linked to one's self perception	• Lack of self confidence • Lack of commitment • Fear of change • Feelings of guilt at being a student • Lack of confidence in academic skills

There now follows an analysis of the data from my empirical study, using the three categories where relevant. Not all of the examples from table 5.1 are used in the analysis. The findings of my data are reported at the end of each section.

5.2: Institutional constraints

For some of the women in my study, the practical problems emerged mostly in the second round of interviews which took place a few weeks before they were due to start their courses. These difficulties tended to be either financial or due more to a perceived general lack of support for mature students.

5.2.1: Financial

In the first interviews, most of the women were aware of the problems they would be likely to face, financially, and were willing to make the necessary sacrifices, but some had felt the unfairness of the system in relation to their own circumstances as women, and felt very strongly about it (Pearce, 1990; McGivney, 1990; Merrill & McKie, 1998; Kennedy, 1997). Carmen had appealed to her local Member of Parliament and had also written to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment over her problem, which she saw as grossly unfair. Because her family was on a low income, she received Family Credit, yet this was considered as her income on the means test, so she had to pay £470 towards her tuition fees. This was seen as a feminist issue in her eyes because her husband, under the same circumstances, would not have had to pay any contribution to

fees at all. She felt she was being made to feel guilty, as the money was given to her for her children. She said:

> it's really a sort of poverty trap, if you don't do it, [the degree] you'll never get a better job, or you won't be fulfilled, you're not actually regarded as an individual with rights, it seems terrible that you've got a family, you've got children who are suffering, and you lose all your rights as a woman, as well (Carmen: 2).

This shows the stress that can be caused when financial difficulties loom so large that Carmen talked of this for most of the interview and kept coming back to the topic as we discussed other matters. She was not really considering giving up her studies even before they had begun, but was very angry and frustrated that the system was so unfair to women. She had tried to make this as public as possible, but felt she was getting nowhere, and was forced to accept the situation if she wished to carry on with her plans to study at university.

Francesca also suffered stress from financial problems. She was a single mother who also received disability benefit and with applying for a student grant, she did not feel confident that she would receive enough money to live on whilst the authorities were sorting out her case. She was in constant fear that all her benefit would be stopped. As her disability is stress related, she was trying to remain calm whilst she sorted this and her childcare arrangements out:

> I can see very clearly why people give up at this stage because it's the hardest part; you're not sure about where the money's going to come from... I think this is

the thing that could bring me down, money, at the end
of the day (Francesca: 2).

Other mature women in the study had also mentioned the sacrifices they and their families had made in order that they might study, particularly regarding the cost of childcare, but some felt that this was their own personal responsibility, based on their own choices to seek education for themselves, an almost selfish action. When I mentioned the access fund, a university supported hardship fund for full-time undergraduates, Carmen had remarked that she would feel selfish applying to that for childcare and that the younger students ought to have priority over her for that. So, for her, even though she was angry at not receiving what she thought was fair for herself, she still did not want to take money away from the younger students who were more 'deserving', even though her own family might suffer.

5.2.2: Age-inappropriate student services

All but one of the undergraduate women had taken access courses which were geared towards mature students, particularly women, where their needs were catered for in study hours that fitted around school hours, confidence building and advice. Access courses have been discussed at some length in chapter 2 (Davies & Parry; Hayes, King & Richardson, 1997), and also below under dispositional factors. Prior to starting their courses, the women were trying to organize their time and make sure everything was in place. Some of them found that a large higher education institute had not yet reached the same standards of support for mature students as their comparatively small colleges had. It was vital for them to plan ahead, particularly those with

children, and many found their efforts to find information frustrating. Ruth needed to know about half terms and timetables in order to organise and budget for her childcare, as she was not receiving a grant, but was unable to access anyone who would give her the information:

> *I think that the students, for 18-20 year olds, it probably doesn't matter, but it, when you've got other commitments and you need answers and you need people to understand that, it matters a lot and I'm already really frustrated with it* (Ruth:2).

Carmen felt there was no-one at the university to help her with her family credit/fees problem as described above:

> *I've spoken to the people at the university, [student services], what help can I get and they were just resigned about it... And they were saying, oh dear, you'll just have to phone up one of these access grants* (Carmen: 2).

Some of the women mentioned that they had heard that Central University was lagging behind in its support of mature students and felt there was a need for someone to take their needs on board. They felt that there were various departments that they needed to approach for different services, but there was no centralised support network that they could consult that would help them with their worries and direct them to the relevant society or group. Friends of theirs at other universities had received clear information about services and societies geared towards mature students as soon as their places had been confirmed, so the comparison made matters seem worse for them.

5.2.3: Inconvenient class times or locations

Most of the women in the study were able to attend all their classes and had contingency plans for any late classes. Carmen, for example, had arranged for her father to collect her daughter from school one day a week when she had a late afternoon session. However, for others who did not have that family network, it became a strain to attend some classes (McBair, 1998; Simms, 1996). Susanne, a single parent with two young children, found it difficult to attend lectures at 9 o'clock in the morning, so consequently missed them in semester one, but made the effort in semester two as she thought the topic was more relevant to her work. The semester one lectures were on skills, and this is where the concept of key skills was introduced, and the semester two lectures were on project skills which she thought she would need for her first year assessment. This reflects the discussion in chapter 3 on students giving more worth to what is to be assessed, and being strategic in what they see as important (James, 2000).

However, Susanne did struggle to make the semester two lectures, and had to manage the arrangements for her children by herself. She felt very strongly the irony of studying social policy and welfare whilst leaving her children alone early morning in the school playground so that she could take a taxi to reach the lecture on time. The children at this point were only 5 and 7 years of age and were not used to being out from 8 o'clock in the morning until late in the evening. Susanne wanted to have the freedom of mind to study but also, as a single mother, had to put the care of her children first. She said:

I feel Central University is not the place for mature students, and I do find it annoying that I have actually heard via other people that they say, 'well, this is the real world', but whose world is real? My world is not real? (Susanne: 3)

Susanne's story is an example of the different tensions that operate in women's lives, with her fractured identity. She was feeling the pull of the different roles she had to take on of student and parent, for example. She was just discovering a different side to herself, that of an intelligent person who had a lot to offer the world, after a difficult childhood and early adulthood. This fragile identity had come into conflict with the higher education institute, which she had seen as her life-saver and from which now, for other reasons as well, to be explored later, she felt alienated. The support network from the access course was no longer in place, and her family lived too far away to be of any practical or emotional support, so she was isolated with only her children. This was her world as she experienced it, and having to attend classes at 9 o'clock proved incredibly difficult for her.

5.2.4: The value of life experience

The example of how the mature students' experience is valued by the institution of higher education has been designated as an institutional constraint by Harris and Brooks. While it is essentially linked to the institution, it does fall into the other two categories of situational and dispositional as well. For this reason, and the fact that it is relevant directly to my research area of investigation and methodology, I will discuss it later in this chapter. For me, this is a really

important issue and I will discuss it as crossing over all the categories.

5.2.5: Summary of institutional constraints

This section has drawn together the impact on the women's lives of those constraints linked to the University itself. The difficulties faced by the participants of this research were financial; obtaining help and advice when they needed it in order to plan ahead, and having to attend early classes which caused problems with childcare and travel. The following section will address the constraints linked to managing the everyday situation of attending university.

These conclusions lead to finding number one.

> **Institutional support was not adequate for mature students and there was no central source of reference that could co-ordinate their needs.**

This finding corroborates conclusions drawn from other research, reported in the literature review of chapter 2. Studies such as those of Harris & Brooks (1998) and McNair (1998) reveal these difficulties, but more recent work suggests that post-92 universities are supportive of mature women students, more so than the pre-1992 institutions (Reay, 2003; Leathwood & Reay, 2009).

5.3: Situational constraints

Situational constraints are those linked to one's current life situation, and examples given by Harris and Brooks include child-care problems, pressures from either giving up work or balancing a job and studies with the economic constraints that impacts upon one. The idea of balancing job, home and other duties can impact severely on the amount of time and emotional energy given to studying, particularly if friends and family are not particularly supportive of the decision to return to education as an adult. I will use these categories in my analysis below, again using only those which are appropriate.

5.3.1: Lack of support from significant others

Lack of support is probably the most common situational factor from my data. However, I will also consider support from significant others, not just spouses, which was the factor in Harris and Brooks' typology. This support, in my research, includes husbands, partners, children and wider family members, particularly parents, and also peers. I will therefore sub-divide this category and discuss them individually.

5.3.1.1: Spousal support

When asked about their motivation for becoming a mature student at university, some of the women stated that they could do so at this time of their lives because they were not needed as much at home, and that their husbands and children supported them in their endeavours. So for most of the women who gave this as a reason, it was outwardly from a positive position. Wendy saw herself as a typical and traditional woman:

> *I think I'm a stereotypical girl of the sixties, where everyone was expected to have a little job, be a secretary and then get married, which, of course, I did* (Wendy:1).

As her children grew, she returned to work, but felt the 'empty nest syndrome' when her children left for university (Hopper & Osbourne, 1975; Tittle & Denker, 1980). This led to her seeking out the local college and enrolling on an access course and subsequently university for herself. She saw this as her time, now that everyone else had been catered for:

> *My children have grown up, they're all settled, my husband's happy and I can step forward and do something new* (Wendy:1).

Similarly, both Sasha, aged 56, and Elizabeth, aged 44, sought to achieve a university education for themselves once their children were older. They had both experienced negative feelings at school, yet neither of them felt that this was due to their own fault but the circumstances of their lives as women had led them that way, and had accepted that was how it was then. None of the three women mentioned above were actively seeking a particular career from their education at this point, but just wanted to experience higher education, 'for myself, for what I can learn' (Sasha:1).

Yet, conversely, Anya, aged 51, still had young children at home, as well as a grown up family; she had brought up seven children all together. She felt that she needed something for herself, an escape from what she considered the drudgery of her domestic situation. She had the stereotypically negative gendered upbringing and was later

encouraged by her grown up daughter to apply to university via access:

> *I'm wandering around in a wilderness of nappies and goodness knows what else.... and it was then that I realized I've got to do it* (Anya: 1).

She was in her second marriage and she reports that her new family was not supportive of her, her husband was ill and she had all the domestic responsibility, so towards the end of her access course she had a crisis of confidence and felt that she would not be able to complete the work to the required standard, and so deferred her place at university until the following year (Hayes, 1997; Harris & Brooks, 1998). Ironically, she actually achieved well above the minimum requirement of the access course, so she returned to college for a year to keep her mind active until taking up the place.

Not surprisingly, much of the discussion in the first interviews was around families, usually how the women were going to fit their education around looking after their families. Wendy felt that her job was now done, she had brought up her family, whilst working full time in an office, but had now felt it was her turn for a chance at a degree which all her family now had, but she would not have considered doing this until her sons had left home. Elizabeth had already brought up her family and nursed her sick father, for which she expressed no resentment, but just saw this time as her opportunity to do something she had always wanted to. These examples reflect the 'second shift' of domestic responsibility that many women take on as well as employment and studying. This also crosses over, in Elizabeth's case, to what Kleinman (2008)

calls the 'third shift' of taking on the emotional burden and care of extended families. Elizabeth unfortunately did not take up her place at university because her sister became ill and she looked after her, too. Elizabeth's case will be discussed further later in the thesis.

As part of my investigation into what skills the women thought they were bringing to university, many of the women talked about their experience of running a house, bringing up children and the skills associated with them that they expected to stand them in good stead in their studies. I was surprised, therefore to find that some still saw the domestic arena as their sole responsibility, and that they were loathe to relinquish it (Deem, 1978; Tittle & Denker, 1980). The example of Elizabeth and Sasha, who wanted to be interviewed together, shows this contradiction.

Domestic arrangements were discussed in some of the interviews, and it appeared that the women continued to see this as their prime responsibility and had taken on the role of student in addition to other responsibilities. Most of these women were of an age which meant that they had left school at a time when women were expected to make a career out of motherhood and fit other work around this. Changing patterns of women's education and employment had now allowed them to seek fulfilment in higher education and better career prospects, yet some still felt guilty about having to expect others in their family to make adjustments in their domestic routine. For those who had waited until their children were older, like Francesca, or whose children had left home, like Wendy, their duties had been lightened, yet they still felt they needed to be there for their children when

needed, such as during university holidays or when the children were studying at home. Husbands were seen as supportive, but still needing attention, as well. I was rather surprised when Sacha remarked about her husband:

> *If I say it's baked beans on toast tonight, he won't turn a hair, he's really good like that* (Sasha: 2).

When I asked if he would be prepared to cook, she conceded that he would, but it would still be beans on toast, and both Sacha and Elizabeth burst out laughing. They both agreed that they would still prefer to do the shopping themselves rather than 'train' their husbands to do it. It appeared that they did not want to let go of their old responsibilities and were prepared to take on additional responsibilities in their studies. Others felt that if they were not in the house all day, it did not really matter if domestic jobs were put off, yet still saw it as ultimately their responsibility. It is interesting that the women still felt that they could not let go of their domestic domain, although this was early days of their degree, and whilst I thought it would be interesting to investigate whether they changed their views, I was unable to do that as Sasha and Elizabeth both left the study and university at the beginning of the first academic year. They had not outwardly seen that the domestic sphere was oppressive to them, as women, or if they did, were not able to voice it. The fact that this interview was with two women at the same time may have affected their discussion, or they may have internalized the socialization of their role, and not thought to question it. The defence mechanism of humour and pretending their husbands would not be able to cope without them perhaps revealed the insecurities they may

have felt about loosening the ties and moving on to something new and perhaps scary, and that it emphasized they were 'good at' domestic work, and were reluctant to relinquish control. They both felt that their husbands were supportive of their studies, but it seemed to me that they were not expecting their husbands to compromise and take over any of the domestic duties, and that if their husbands did attempt to help; these men were not deemed capable by their wives.

However, some of the PGCE students also had worries just before their courses began. They had just completed two weeks working in a primary school and the three who had young children had all stated that it had given a good indication of what it would be like to manage their domestic arrangements once they began their course. Although all three had mentioned previously that they expected their partners to share the responsibility, they all felt that the task of organising their time and childcare was their responsibility. Judy had just finished her two weeks in school when I interviewed her on the Friday evening, and she was still buzzing. She remarked, about having to juggle her commitments:

> *…so it's like, what do we do this evening so we're ready in the morning and it was constantly sort of thinking, I must get this done, I must get that done, making lists all the time... I couldn't function in the evening time and I thought, well, leave the mess and just put a tin of baked beans on the table* (Judy:2).

So again, compromise was the order of the day, and some did actually voice the fact that they felt guilty about expecting others to put themselves out, reflecting what the women on the undergraduate course had said about putting themselves forward.

5.3.1.2: Parental Influence

For the women over forty years of age, it often emerged that the direction their lives took on leaving school was not of their own choosing, and parents still seemed to have influence over their lives even now, so this analysis fits into the situational category of lack of support, although it does have an impact on self-esteem as well. Much of this data was from the initial interviews in response to questions about why the women were embarking upon their university courses, and formed part of their life history, but for some, it was fundamental to their identity both then and now. Some women mentioned that their parents did not believe in education for girls, others that they had chosen caring or secretarial jobs which is reflected in the literature in chapter 2 (Spender, 1982; 1984; Deem, 1978; Hopper & Osborn, 1975; Mallia & Wallis, 1996, Dyehouse, 1998). I wanted to investigate further whether these choices were free choices or within what they considered was available, or suitable for girls. Few people questioned their parents' authority, apart from Susanne, who ran away from home when she was seventeen after working as a hotel receptionist for a short while. This parental influence surprised me, as previous work on parental influence, as cited above, considered this at the time of leaving school, but I did not come across any literature linking the strength of influence parents still had over their

daughters when they became mature women, and the decisions that were still being made which linked back to their parents.

As well as conforming to the wishes of their parents, sometimes women were expected to fulfill their parents' expectations when they did not necessarily accord with their own wishes. The experience of Judy shows how she tried to please her parents, but had not questioned her own motives until much later in life, when she was able to problematise what she was doing, and realized that she had to take charge of her own life (Freire, 1972). She was considered the clever daughter from a working class family of four girls and was encouraged to be a solicitor:

> *I think the reason I was perhaps guided into something like law is because [they thought] it was glamorous, thought that lots of money would be there at the end of it and it would be a very sort of powerful, a very good job for a woman to be in* (Judy:1).

It is interesting to note that she felt she was guided towards this career, that it would not necessarily have been her own first choice. Once she had obtained her law degree, she studied for her solicitors' finals in London. She felt completely out of her depth socially and had no real interest in her work, so she ran away to be a waitress, travelled, had children and lived abroad for a while, finding it difficult to make commitments of any kind. She talked of her difficulty in relating to her father, and her sense of failure towards him. Later, she studied at home to try again for her finals and knew she stood a very good chance of passing this time. Her

father drove her to London for the examinations, which made her feel uneasy, and once in the examination room she lost her nerve and could not function at all:

> *I thought this must be a sign... I shouldn't be here and it was like this huge relief came over me... I don't need to be doing this for my dad or for anybody else, if it's not right for me, then I shouldn't be doing this at all (Judy:1).*

And she walked out, much to her father's horror. She is now taking a PGCE course with a view to teaching French as a Modern Foreign Language, as she had spent some time in France and enjoyed telling stories and singing songs with the local children, and thought she had a flair for languages.

Parental influence can also be directly damaging by this type of negativity. Susanne was repeatedly told by her mother that she was stupid, and it took many years before she began to believe in her own intelligence, and that she had the capability to pursue further and higher education. Even on the eve of beginning her undergraduate course, she could not admit to herself that she would be able to complete the course:

> *I'm coming thinking, OK, I'm here for a year and at the end of the year, I'll see where I'm at and I'll do the next year, if I so choose to, if I don't pass, it's not a problem (Susanne:1).*

When I asked her why, she replied:

> *It's my way of dealing with it because the idea of coming here for three years to set myself up for a degree is ridiculous* (Susanne: 1).

Francesca's ambition was also thwarted by her mother. She wanted to be an actress and trained in drama, but her mother told her:

> *'All actresses are prostitutes, you don't do things like that, go out and get a proper job'* (Francesca: 1).

So she joined the civil service and then a large retail store for a number of years, before having her first child.

However, other parents often felt they were acting in their child's best interests by letting them follow their dreams, but sometimes this had the opposite effect. Yasmin's parents allowed her to leave school at fifteen to take up a career in modelling after winning a competition. In the first interview with me, Yasmin admitted that she had been too young to do this and ultimately became a victim of the fashion industry, starving herself and taking laxatives to stay slim, and making herself ill. Models were required to be measured every week:

> *They'd say, 'look, you've put on half an inch on your hips, you've got thirty six inch hips, it's not good enough, we'll give you two weeks to lose it' or 'you're going to have to go away and do some exercises and come back'* (Yasmin:1).

The fact that it was other women judging her body can be seen in Foucault's panopticon metaphor, and the idea of self policing (Foucault, 1979). Whilst Yasmin's parents thought

they were allowing their daughter to have a wonderful opportunity, it was actually an oppressive regime that she was being subjected to, but in the name of beauty and fashion, where ideas of femininity were forced upon her, and which she bought into at first, until, like the example of Judy above, she realized that this was not her choice and that she was also being oppressed by the industry and linked to this, by other men, too. She found it difficult to break out of modeling, because other women envied her and thought it was glamorous, thus she felt that they thought that she was letting down other women by giving up. The invisible discourse of power was holding her until she was able to name the oppression and break away. This would fit Freire's (1972) vision of conscientisation, yet she still felt judged by what she was then, rather than what she is now, so it was only an individual rather than social transformation. After working in the United States and having been taken advantage of by a number of men, she eventually gave it up and returned home, determined to study and gain some qualifications as she had none when she had left school early to pursue this career. She described how she came to realize how false the industry was. After being told to lose more weight after starving herself and taking laxatives the night before she was to be measured:

> *I just got sick of it. I was about sixteen and a half… I carried on doing it and I thought, I don't like doing this, I can't eat what I want, constantly feeling, you know, I was obsessed with it, even up until about three years ago, oh, she's skinnier than me therefore she's better than me, and now, I just don't give a toss… it's disgusting when I look back, I think, that is disgusting,*

what you did, what you do to girls every day, because when you are fifteen… you are going to be a flat-chested nymph, because most fifteen year old are when you start (Yasmin, 1).

None of these women blamed their parents directly in any way for the way they were treated, and most felt sympathy towards them, often explaining and justifying their behaviour. Whilst trying not to be judgmental myself, I was surprised at the extent of the influence parents had on their daughters, and how much it still remained part of their lives, often having been worked through with great pain. The two single mothers in the study, Francesca and Susanne, both felt a sense of loss in being on their own, for neither had extended families to call upon, and had not had good relationships with their parents either, so both consciously worked on building up a strong sense of family with their own children, actively giving their children time as well as trying to include them in their studies by encouraging them to do their homework alongside each other, for example.

5.3.1.3: Peer support

Feminism began, as discussed in detail in chapter 4, as a movement by oppressed women. From small beginnings, other oppressed women challenged the essentialist character of feminism, and a huge body of literature has discussed this. In chapter 4, I discussed the multiplicity of oppressions and how many women could be the oppressors of others, the 'oppressor within'. Foucault calls these discourses 'regimes of truth' where there is an accepted behaviour or belief that is rarely challenged, and people within a particular oppressed group can 'police' each other to make sure those boundaries

are kept (Foucault, 1980; Lukes, 1997). I discussed an example of this using the internalised belief that 'women are not good at maths' and it becomes a 'truth' not to be resisted.

In this study, the women were accessing higher education at an age which did not reflect the traditional age of students, something they all had in common, and perhaps were not seen as the norm by other women. This has resulted in some cases, of being policed by other women, who appeared to disapprove of what they were doing, perhaps neglecting their families, or breaking out of the accepted norm for a woman of a certain age. This is demonstrated in a comment first of all from Sasha, but then an extended example from Sarah, after she had left university and taken up employment as a teacher. Both women were made to feel guilty and selfish by their actions.

Elizabeth and Sasha had commented through their access course how they had been particularly supported by female tutors, and found it encouraging. However, there were other women who took delight in denigrating their aspirations:

> *I've got a friend, before I started this course, her sister in law went to do a degree, and she said, she's 46, she's trying to get her youth back, the only thing she's worried about is what trousers she should wear to university, so when I, this year, I felt I didn't really want to say, then I thought, why should I, I'm proud of it and she said, oh well, if it makes you happy* (Sasha: 2).

This was a patronising comment, trying to belittle the fact that someone was trying to break through the barriers, using sexist and ageist and then dismissive language. This was not the solidarity that one would have expected from another woman. It had made Sasha feel diminished by the comments, and she almost did not own up to this woman that she was going to become a mature student herself. This negative reaction was also commented upon in Brine & Waller's study (2004) on access students where one of their student participants reported hostile reactions from family and friends when she told them she was a student, which did not accord with her own view that students should be respected, whatever their age (Brine & Waller, 2004, p 105).

Sarah, one of the PGCE students felt pressure from her peers once she had become a teacher. In order to introduce Sarah, a short vignette is shown below:

> Sarah was 31 when she began her PGCE in Mathematics, having gained her degree at the same university ten years ago. Her husband works shifts and they have three children aged 5, 7 & 9 when she started her PGCE. Sarah always wanted to teach but they chose to start a family on leaving university, so she has now taken the opportunity to train as the children are older and the university is close to where they live. She did not work outside the home while the children were small. At the time of the interview quoted below, she was working at a comprehensive school on a 0.8 contract, working four days a week, and was also a governor at her local primary school.

Sarah stated that she had been made to feel guilty because she wanted to continue to work part time now her children were teenagers, rather than take on full time employment. She felt under pressure from other women to work full time and sometimes felt inadequate and that she should be going

for promotion even though she did not want it. Sarah was here subjected to what Foucault calls the 'gaze' from other women. Because what is taken for granted that when women go to work, they should take all opportunities offered to them, this is the valued option, and those who did not wish to follow this route were deviating from the norm as an individual in a disciplined society. This discourse is a social one where the valued option, that women should be as ambitious as men and are thought to be weak otherwise, or letting the side down, and can be seen as an invisible or subtle oppression. Foucault describes this as:

> *a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society* (Foucault, 1977, p 209).

Although Sarah was critically questioning this view, she still needed to keep her job and the respect of the community in which she worked, so was feeling guilty because she did not want to work five full days because she valued her time being at home with her children. She was also obliquely being criticised by other women with children because her children were now teenagers and Sarah strongly believed that they needed her just as much as when they were small, but in different ways:

> *It's starting to feel, not like a fight, but I've been quite determined that I want to work part time and people are now starting to say, as the children are starting to get a bit bigger, still part time? … I've been very determined to keep things balanced. I mean this last school year I've had*

some moments of doubt when various friends have gone for promotion and they're working full time and, its silly, maybe I should be pushing myself forward when they say, are you going for promotion? And, oh, should I be? And I started to doubt that what I was doing was right (Sarah: 6).

Although she had no aspirations to be head of department, the recently appointed incumbent made her feel, again, that maybe she should have gone for it, as 'I was as good as her'. She was made to feel that she had failed in some way for not applying for the job, that she was not fulfilling her professional potential. She also felt pressure when asked how long she has been in teaching, because she had taken time out at home to look after the children when they were young:

Because I've been out of education, at home, but it doesn't count, it's not like saying I've had ten years in industry; quite regularly people say, 'Oh, how long have you been in teaching?' And they look at you and they count up – what have you been doing the rest of the time? (laughs) and they say, 'How old are they?' [The children who are now teenagers] and I've said the wrong thing, now, haven't I, admitting that? And I wasn't just a housewife. I see a housewife as keeping home and cleaning and I'm afraid that's the lowest of my priorities. Full time child care! (Sarah: 6).

So Sarah's view of the world where she would be happy working four days a week and spending three with her children was made to seem inadequate for a woman of Sarah's intelligence and professional standing. It was her

choice, but she still internalised the discourse of what she ought to do, in other people's eyes, and was made to feel bad about it. This view of domestic skills not being valued will be explored later in this chapter.

Other situational factors such as childcare problems, job and time pressures and economic strains did not feature very much in the interviews, although there were occasional references to them by the participants. These factors were not considered to be of continuing importance, and were sorted out eventually. For example, Francesca could not have a place in the campus nursery right at the beginning of her course, but once her son was settled, there were no further problems. Rebecca had aimed to work part time as well as study, but found that she could not maintain both, and gave up her job. This did not cause too many financial problems for her. At the time of this research, tuition fees in universities had not been introduced, so this was not a factor that might have impacted upon their finances.

5.3.2: Summary of situational constraints

This section has demonstrated mostly how other individuals influence the participants, and often have a detrimental effect on how they feel about themselves. Spousal support was seen as a positive influence by some, but lack of support caused one women to postpone her course and then to abandon it completely. Parents seemed to have a great influence, both when the women were leaving school and at the point of beginning their courses. Surprisingly, peer support was often related as being negative, with other women reacting

negatively towards some of the women in this study. These conclusions lead to finding number two:

> **The influence of significant others, (husbands, partners, parents, peers) whether positive or negative, was seen as important in the women's self identity as mature women in higher education.**

This finding is reflected in the literature reviewed in chapter two regarding mature students (Tittle & Denker, 1980; Harris & Brooks, 1998; West, 1996 & Clouder, 1997, for example). Much of this research concentrates on spousal or partner support during the time in education. Other research also considers parental influence at the time of leaving school, but my finding shows that parental influence is still important when returning to study.

The next section turns to look more deeply at the women's perception of themselves and of their skills.

5.4: Dispositional factors

Dispositional factors are those linked to self-perception, and because of the nature of my study, the bulk of the analysis fits here as my focus was on the participants' own view of their skills. At this point, I return to the areas of investigation as articulated in the introduction to this thesis. These were the three sub-sections:

I would like to understand more about how some mature women students articulate and value skills they bring with them to higher education.

I would like to understand more about the perceptions of mature women students of how institutions of higher education value their skills.

I would like to understand more about how mature women's perceptions of their skills change through undertaking degree courses.

Using the dispositional category of analysis, these questions will be subdivided into two points each. The first will be in terms of the women's perceptions of their skills; the second considers life experience and different ways of working from younger students which demonstrate how the women perceive their own skills are valued and the third question considers two major points on how the women link their skills to employment. Although Harris and Brooks see academic skills in terms of their lack being a barrier to achievement, my own analysis of the data considers the question of skills much more deeply, hence I use the category of analysis as 'dispositional factors' rather than 'constraints'. I will take each question in turn and demonstrate how the women in my study perceive their skills, including changes over time. Where a participant's case has been discussed at some length, a small vignette of that person has been included as a reminder from chapter 4.

5.4.1: First research sub-section:

I would like to understand more about how some mature women students articulate and value skills they bring with them to higher education.

This is divided into two sections for analysis, firstly how the participants articulate the skills they bring with them to higher education, and also how these skills are used and developed during their time at university. Before moving on to those questions, the self-esteem of the women is explored, as this is an important factor in how one see's oneself. In Harris and Brooks' typology, they refer to it as self-confidence, which I would suggest relates more to assurance, whereas self-esteem is more about self-worth, which is more relevant to my thesis. The data have been analysed under two headings, undergraduates and graduates, as there was a marked difference in attitudes to study between the two.

5.4.1.1: Self esteem

5.4.1.1.1: Self-esteem: the undergraduates

From the first interviews, most of the women were worried about starting university, seeing it both as exciting and a huge change in their lives, being able to cope with the academic rigours and the practical issues outlined above. This section will concentrate on their experience of access courses which for most were instrumental in their decision to follow a course in higher education.

Attending an access course was a very important step back into education for eight of the women in the study, that is, all but one of the undergraduates, the exception being Yasmin, the youngest participant at 25. Apart from learning the skills necessary to participate in higher education, the most important aspect for these women has been the development of self-confidence and the sense of support from their tutors and peers (this has been explored in some depth in chapter 2, where the work of Williams (1997); Davies & Parry, 1993 and Hayes, King & Richardson (1997) was critiqued).

The approach and path to university via access courses was different for each of the women. Some went into college to find out how to get to university, some went to college to update their skills or find something to occupy their time, whilst others seemed to find access by happy accident. Rebecca joined a part time access course in order to give herself something else in her life apart from work as a care assistant and home with teenagers neither of which occupations she found demanding. She wasn't sure what it was:

> *I started about a month late, and I didn't even know what the access was about. . . it was only as I went along and listened what other people were doing it for, that I realised what it was for. . . so I thought to try for university. . .I wouldn't lose anything by trying* (Rebecca:1).

Similarly, Wendy wanted something to enhance her life of home and work, so went to the local college for something to study at night school, and was attracted to the access course.

However, other women had held the idea of a university education as a lifelong ambition, having put it on hold for reasons beyond their control. Elizabeth had always regretted being made to leave school at 16 as her brothers were allowed to progress to university, but her father did not believe in education for girls. She told me that:

> *I thought, well, I was as capable as what they were, so I thought, later on in life I'll do it* (Elizabeth: 1).

Similarly, Francesca could not go to university when she was young because of lack of funds and her life circumstances militated against her until she made a concerted effort when she became forty to 'do or die'. She still had many problems, but was most determined to overcome all the obstacles, saying that:

> *It's partly a dream come true and partly my worst nightmare at the moment* (Francesca: 1).

At the time of their first interview, all the women on these courses had succeeded in achieving their access qualification and accepted their places at university, all but one to begin the next academic year. For some, even applying for the access course was traumatic; Elizabeth did not believe that she would be accepted because she only had 0-Levels, but related that she had been told:

> *Don't be silly, send the application form in, we do interviews, I panicked... and thought once they see me, they're going to say, no, but there, I got accepted onto the course and never looked back* (Elizabeth:1).

Anya had no idea how to apply to university, so went to her local careers office who directed her to the local college:

> *They heard my story and thought, either I wanted to be committed or I was committed because of how I felt....then I suddenly realised I'd actually enrolled onto the access course and basically I didn't know what on earth access was about* (Anya:1).

Others were determined to use the access course as the stepping stone they needed and took the bull by the horns. Francesca, a single mother with two children, did this:

> *I picked up my son under my arm and walked into the college and said, "Can I speak to someone about helping me get into a university?" And somebody wonderful just took him off me and they said, yes, we've got the perfect course for you, here we go, and within six weeks I was applying to university and within three months I'd got an interview and a place* (Francesca:1).

Carmen used the access course as a sounding board to see if she could cope with university and similarly found it a positive and enriching experience. She had begun with the idea of primary teaching, but through the access course, her outlook had broadened and she decided to study social policy and administration, with a view to working in local government or doing further research:

> *I wasn't sure whether I could cope with the kind of work, producing essays, cope with the family pressures of that and finding time for my family, find the time for*

*study, find time for reading, and it's a big agenda, you
know and I found that it was really like a test to see
whether I could do this sort of thing. I feel very humble
to have been asked to go to this university… but I will
do my best* (Carmen: 1).

There were many, many positive feelings voiced for the
access courses from all those who experienced them, but on
closer inspection, some were voicing their fears that maybe it
was too easy and that when they attended university they
would find it too difficult. These fears were usually covered up
by the comments that perhaps the change in environment
might be difficult to cope with, but the fears still seemed very
real. Yet, the prevailing view from some of the women was
that Central University was such a hallowed institution that
they felt honoured to be invited to take up a place there.
Anya, whenever she mentioned the name of the university,
spoke in hushed tones. She was thrilled to be offered her
place, but was so proud she had to pull herself up every so
often and say to herself:

> *Who on earth do you think you are, you even **applied**
> to Central University, you had the **cheek** to do that!*
> (Anya: 1).

All of the above comments were offered in a spirit of humour,
but I think the sentiments were deeply felt about being
worthy, and showed their lack of confidence.

For most of the women, their fears about their own ability to
cope with a course in higher education may have only been
the fear of change; of something new, and which, once they
were settled into the new environment, they would actually

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relish the challenge. Some, however, seemed to be worriers, feeling negative about themselves even though they had succeeded throughout their access courses and in other aspects of their lives. The socialisation process where women were not expected to be educated, to put others before themselves and have no real aspirations for themselves seemed to be firmly entrenched and I feel is reflected in guilty feelings about wanting to achieve something for themselves. (See section on gendered education, stressing the caring role of girls, and their career advice to go into a caring job before marriage, Mallia & Wallis, 1997 for example, and the work of Spender, 1984 and Deem, 1978). This may have manifested itself in the need for constant reassurance even in the face of past successes. Elizabeth stated early in the interview that she thought she had been capable of higher education when she was young, but never had the opportunity. Since then she had achieved much in her personal life and cared for her own and her extended family. In the access course, she gained firsts, yet was still not convinced that she has earned her place:

> *I think that they're giving us generous marks. . .I always think they're thinking, oh, they're mature students, let's humour them a bit* (Elizabeth:1).

She was determined to succeed, but still saw herself as needing emotional support and hoped that the lecturers would make allowances for mature students:

> *I really need someone to keep saying to me, every now and then, I go through phases when I'm really*

confident. . . but a fortnight from now, I'll be panicking,
thinking, who do I think I am? (Elizabeth: 1).

Her family was very supportive of her as was another
student, Sasha, who was also on the same access course, and
they gave each other mutual support, fluctuating between
needing and giving support to each other.

By the time of the second interviews which took place a week
before the undergraduate course began, there seemed to be
a dip in self-confidence, perhaps because it had been three or
four months since their access courses had finished and they
were again doubting their abilities.

Most of the women had been actively preparing by reading as
much as possible around their subject area, with books taken
from reading lists when they were made available, and books
often recommended or lent by friends. Some had attended
the study skills days provided by the university, as much for
the chance to spend the day familiarising themselves with
their surroundings as for the skills themselves. Some
admitted that they did not really need to attend, but wanted
to meet other students, find their way around or just pick up
any additional tips. Francesca had also visited the campus a
few times with her children or friends, checking out the
catering facilities and book shops, so as not to feel too
bewildered on the first day. She joked about it but added:

> *I can sound fairly blasé about it, but actually, I really*
> *am very worried about it* (Francesca: 2).

This lack of confidence manifested itself in different ways,
particularly with Rebecca, who, like Susannah in the first

interviews, refused to admit that she would ever gain her degree and was only aiming to finish her first year, not daring to look ahead any further. She had no particular career aspirations, and was insistent that she was only doing the degree for interest. When her friends asked her what she would do with her degree, she would reply:

> *Well, it won't make any difference because I won't have it at the end so I won't be able to do anything with it!* (Rebecca: 2).

Although it was said in a joking manner, it was her own defensive coping mechanism to account for any possible slip ups along the way. Other women wanted to ask me questions about certain issues that were worrying them, such as the social make up of the student population, the relevant importance of lectures as opposed to in-depth reading, and more very detailed questions. It was clear that they had a number of worries that they could perhaps use the interviews to voice. The use of humour suggested that they were worried, but did not want to admit how much, but were putting into place their coping mechanisms.

5.4.1.1.2: Self-esteem: the graduates

The graduate participants in my study had a totally different attitude to their forthcoming university studies to the undergraduate participants in terms of self-esteem. The undergraduate women were characterized by their lack of confidence as established by the section above on access courses. This lack of confidence did not appear so apparent in the four women who were beginning PGCE courses, perhaps for a variety of reasons. They were all younger than the

majority of the undergraduates I interviewed, between the ages of 29 and 35, having obtained their first degrees straight from school in the 1980s. Their schooling, although still gendered was more likely to have been through the comprehensive system, whereas most of the undergraduate participants attended single sex, two-tiered or boarding schools. This confidence may also be reflected in the better career choice and opportunities available at that time for girls (Pearce, 1990). During the 1980s girls were encouraged more to pursue a career, or further education and would be less likely to be expected to leave school and take a job before starting a family. The undergraduates who expressed concern over lack of confidence tended to be those over forty. The younger ones still had their doubts but tended to attribute their late return to education more to external and practical factors than to lack of opportunity. Sarah had always wanted to teach, but personal circumstances caused her to delay her training. Judy and Ruth made the decision whilst bringing up their families, knowing that they did not want to return to their former jobs, and that they were looking for something more fulfilling, and Jenny already had experience of teaching abroad and decided the PGCE qualification would enhance her career prospects further. Three of these students had young children when they started the course.

Their attitude towards their PGCE course was generally very positive, as Ruth commented:

> *Well, you're a graduate, you know you can do it* (Ruth: 1).

This raised the question for me as to what is a graduate, and why does being a graduate make one feel confident in one's abilities? This was the general feeling from these four women. However, as these women did in fact go on to higher education straight from school perhaps shows that they were given the opportunity at the time. Some of the older undergraduate women had voiced the feeling of being passed over, so for the graduates, their reasons for accessing higher education were linked to other factors. They may have had fears of something new, but not in their own ability to complete the course successfully. This was not just an extension of their first degree subject either, because three of them were taking on additional subjects and the other was doing something completely different from her first degree. Perhaps it was due to the fact that a graduate, having worked for a few years and perhaps also raised a family, felt more able to cope with a post-graduate course in teaching than if she had gone straight from completing her first degree. These years out for the graduates may have made a difference in complete contrast to the fact that many years out before completing a first degree seemed to have had the opposite effect on the prospective undergraduates. Certainly, the four women I interviewed felt that they would make better teachers now than they would have done if they had taken the course straight after graduation. Sarah, a mother of three young children had always wanted to teach and had used her years out to make sure she still wanted to do it. She admitted:

> *[I am] probably less confident, but only that I'm more*
> *aware of the problem, so I think, certainly, I'd be better*

> *suited to teaching ten years onward than at 21 ... I'm much more realistic* (Sarah:1).

Ruth, also the mother of three young children, felt that her experience with her own children had given her courage to deal with older children:

> *I'm confident in my own life. . .I think kids could have destroyed me when I was 23, and now, I don't think they could* (Ruth:1).

As already explored above, Judy had enjoyed teaching young children, along with her own, when she was travelling in France after giving up on her law career. She had considered teaching English in France, but decided to return home to teach French.   After four months intensive study in France, on what she described as similar to an access course for French people, she felt confident enough in her French to attempt the PGCE in England, which gave her a new direction after running away from Law College.

5.4.1.2: Skills

The following two categories of analysis under the first sub-division of the research question fit within Harris and Brooks' 'lack of confidence in academic skills' as exemplified in table 5.1. As the main interest of my thesis is in skills, and the value that these skills are given by the women and by the institution, the category has been expanded to differentiate between how the women recognized their skills as mature women before they attended university, and then how they perceived these skills were developed, along with new skills, over their period of study.

5.4.1.2.1: Awareness of own skills prior to higher education

In the first interviews with the participants, they were asked what skills they thought they were bringing with them to higher education that would help in their studies. All but one of the participants had either studied on an access course, or had already obtained a first degree, so were all generally positive that mature women brought particular skills from their lives. These beliefs were based on their lived experience of running a home, bringing up children, working outside of the home, or just having experienced life with all its joys and pitfalls; all things they believed that the younger students would not necessarily have any or much experience of. Almost all of the women perceived that the younger students would be going to university straight from school, although this was not necessarily the case.

Skills developed through employment were often valued; particularly those who had worked in what they felt were responsible positions such as Francesca as a sales supervisor and Wendy as a personal assistant. Others felt that the type of work they had done previously may work against them in future careers after their degrees. For example, Yasmin did not want to deny her previous employment as a model which she had enjoyed up to a point and felt she had gained valuable knowledge and experience of the world and of human nature. Nevertheless she felt she would need to explain that it had not necessarily been her own choice and feared it may appear frivolous to a future employer. I present here a vignette of Yasmin:

Yasmin was approached in the street by a photographer who wanted to take photos of her with a view to her becoming a model. She was 15 and her parents agreed if she took a chaperone. This was not a good experience, but she was also approached by a woman who introduced her to a modelling agency. Her career as a model took her to the United States, and in her own words, some abusive relationships with men. When she realized the life was not for her, she came home and studied A-Levels with a view to a Business Studies degree, and was also working part time for a computer company. She eventually realised that she did not like the subject area and decided to study English, something she felt she was good at and enjoyed.

Her parents thought modelling was a good opportunity for her as she won a modelling competition and it allowed her to travel, and allowed her to leave school at 15. She admitted it was exciting but also felt she had no qualifications. When asked if being mature brought its own skills, she replied:

> *I do and I don't. I do, I agree with you, I've thought that, I've always thought that because you're mature, you bring with you experience of other things, but recently I've been hearing that people are quite prejudiced against mature students now because they want people, you know, fresh people that have just got their degree, and I think it could swing both ways, really, I hope it does, obviously, I'd be devastated if it didn't because of what I did when I left school, I don't know whether employers would look down on modelling…I often wonder how that looks on my CV… I don't know, I can't change what I've done, that's me, I wouldn't lie about it* (Yasmin:1).

However, she did feel that she would need to justify why she had done it in an interview situation and we discussed how she might portray it in a positive way:

> *The things I've learnt about people and the world in general, and how superficial it is for modelling, it's just, I'm glad I know, and its made me a lot more aware of, you know, people and made me a lot stronger, I think, having to cope on my own at that age. I think you've got to explain it, you have to, you can't just sort of leave it* (Yasmin: 1).

The contradiction was of knowing the value of what she has learned through her experience, but acknowledging the frivolous way in which the industry was perceived by others, and having to justify what she did. Modelling is mostly associated with women, and not a 'serious' occupation, was the implication, not valued in patriarchal society. Yasmin realised this, and it was one of the reasons she left, when she realised she was worth more than just a body being used. It took her a while to finally decide that she could give herself permission to do what she wanted to do, which was study English. She had tried working in business because she felt that was a serious occupation, but had not enjoyed it. So for Yasmin, being mature was making that decision for herself. When she began university, she still clung on to her independence and was driving to work each day, and was keeping her part time job. By the time of her second interview once she had started university, in the November, she had moved into a flat near the university and given up her job and her boyfriend, and was making a new life for

herself. And as previously reported, she gave up by default from taking part in this study.

Many of the respondents did feel that being mature was an advantage and would stand them in good stead in their studies. However, many had difficulty in articulating what they meant by being mature, and put forward abstract terms such as 'staying power' (Carmen:1); 'the motivation thing' (Yasmin: 1); 'a lot of things really that you learn along the way' (Elizabeth:1); 'I'm 40 so I suppose it's just what you've grasped as you go along' (Rebecca:1) and 'a lot of problem solving skills' (Anya:1). These were all very positive manifestations of being mature, and would probably have been drawn out and emphasised on the access courses. Being a mature woman myself, there seemed to be a shared understanding between interviewer and interviewee of the advantages of being mature (Finch, 1984; Reinharz, 1992; Oakley, 1981).

The feminist and other philosophical literature critiqued in chapter 4 stresses again and again the importance of life experience, and how each individual's experience is located within the social structures within which they live (Harding, 1987; Hawkesworth, 1989; Freire, 1972). The life experience of the women in my study will affect how they approach higher education, and Carmen was able to situate her maturity in her own experience:

> *People bring other skills along because you are a*
> *mature person, you are actually in the world, and you*
> *sort of, you've dealt with lots of situations, and when*

people mention things, I mean, I used to notice this in sociology, they'd mention things like the education system and you'd suddenly think, yeah, I've seen that, or I can see how that fits in because you've actually got practical experience and seen how other people react to things, it actually gave you a deeper perspective because you've actually experienced it, it's not just reading, it's just you, you do actually have a deeper understanding of it (Carmen:1).

Carmen valued the insight that she felt someone who had experience of life could have, particularly in the subject she had chosen to study, social policy. So the majority of the women in the study had an awareness that they were bringing particular skills with them into higher education.

5.4.1.2.2: Perception of own skills development in higher education

In this section I discuss how some of the women felt about their development of skills over their time at university and how, for most, it changed over the period. At the beginning most women were unable to articulate their skills very well, and often suggested 'being mature' as a way to describe their skills in a positive way. Carmen was reading Social Policy, and I attended the lecture on key skills put on by her school, where she completed a skills audit. She discussed this with me in a subsequent interview. Carmen's vignette is shown below:

Carmen is married with three children, aged 4, 7 & 9 at the time of the first interview. She attended her local further education college for an access course, originally planning to become a primary school teacher, but then changed her mind since participating in the access course to a wish to work in local government, particularly in housing. This led her to reading Social Policy and Administration at university. Prior to having the children, she had worked as a buyer for a large store in London. She was fairly confident in a general way about approaching university study and was realistic about how her experience would be different to a younger person, because of her added responsibilities of a family.

This is how Carmen described how she felt as a mature student, and what she brought to university that would stand her in good stead, and which she felt the access course had helped her identify:

> *There are certain differences between the people who have just left school, there's no question about that because I do think the experience you take from the world, the society you've lived in, you've actually had to negotiate in society, the person, and I think you've gained a heck of a lot of skills that you don't even realise until you've actually got in there, and sort of, you start listening to issues they're talking about and you think, oh yes, we can see that, it starts slotting in and you see them, so I mean you take a lot of that with you* (Carmen:1).

Carmen was asked in her third interview about the student self assessments that had to be filled in at the first Wednesday morning. I asked how she felt about filling them in:

> *I didn't really feel anything, I know this is your special project, but I didn't really feel anything about it at all. I have to say, some areas of these, like, for example, information technology, I'm amazed at how little help there is, you know, and I'm amazed how you're left to find out for yourself, I'm beginning to think, myself, that I ought to perhaps go on a course…. Or something over the summer, in the holidays, just to get some practical help…* (Carmen: 3).

She then talked at length about her problems with Information Technology and lack of direction as to where to get help at university. The one skill where she felt deficient was understandably what she was most concerned with at this time, as this was holding her back from moving on. Carmen was not really sure what she was supposed to do with the skills audit sheet once it had been completed in the lecture, but felt it had given her a good idea of where she was at, at the beginning of her course, and what she felt she might like to practise more. She assumed that all these skills were going to be addressed within the course and that she would be told if she was not achieving them. She was concerned about a couple of the performance criteria, feeling that something like giving a presentation would be impossible for her ever to do because of how she felt when she tried to do it, but the parts of the IT that she felt weak on, she felt that she could work to improve, or at least find help.

Carmen appears outwardly self-possessed and articulate, but described how she felt when having to do a presentation, that it does not come naturally to her. When I asked whether she

would seek help with this or whether she thought it might come just through practice, she commented:

> *I suppose, I don't think it's remedial, I just don't think you can make it better. I don't feel very positive about it, I feel very negative, I think it's part of my personality and I don't think I'll ever be able to* (Carmen:3).

On further discussion, she decided that if it was a skill, then, (with laughter):

> *Yes, there is a skill, right, in that case, there must be a course, I shall go for it, because, yes, I suppose it's just a self confidence thing* (Carmen:3).

This comment, although made in jest, underlines the fact that if something is seen as a skill, it can be learned, but if it is seen as a personality trait, then the lack of that ability is seen as a deficiency of character.

The two skills she perceived differently, one as part of her character, the other, something that she could learn to do. Application of number seemed to hover between the two and she admitted that mathematics was something she had always struggled with but had not felt that she had been sufficiently challenged so far, and then she quickly changed the subject.

Apart from the two students training to be mathematics teachers, the women in my study seemed to be operating avoidance mechanisms where application of number was concerned, whilst accepting that to be numerate is important in the modern world, putting it on one side until it could be avoided no longer. Fear of numbers is generally 'accepted' to

be a female trait (see Foster, Arnt & Honkola, 2004, for example, on internalizing disciplines of power of what it is to be a woman).

From a positive point of view, Carmen was using her skills that she had articulated in the early interview, of being mature and was finding them helpful. She felt that time management was a natural development of being a married woman and that mature women automatically take these organisational skills with them to university and were able to transfer them accordingly. She was determined to organise her time so that she would not have to ask for extension dates on her essays, not wanting to use the children as an 'excuse' for not completing her tasks on time. Once settled, she realized that she became more assertive in voicing her needs, but still problematised those needs as her 'problem':

> *I feel that the skills I've got, for example, balancing everything together, and also being aware of what the whole is, that does actually help me because it helps me put my work into perspective, I know how to express myself and say, 'that's my problem, how can you help me?' Whereas perhaps if I hadn't had the experience I've had, you just wouldn't be able to assert yourself* (Carmen: 3).

Like Carmen, the skill expressed by most of the women as the one they wished to develop most was information technology. This skill is the least personal of the key skills and the one easiest to learn as opposed to develop, so perhaps this is the least surprising, a 'hard' skill using the definition from chapter 3. It is not something, like communication, that is part of one's life from birth, however abstract, but is something that

has to be learned. Familiarity and practice can develop proficiency in the subject which perhaps should be referred to as a competency rather than a skill. However, some people, quite often men, take to it more readily than others, so perhaps that is why it is accepted as a skill. The gender difference here could be classed as the fact that historically more women than men have been secretaries or typists, now called word processing; this is a competency. Men tend to favour programming, the more technical aspect of computers, but also enjoy computer games, the more skillful aspect of computing. This reflects the discussion of the 'hard' and 'soft' skills in chapter 3. Some women were finding that they had to work hard to build upon their word processing skills and become more proficient at the more technical and creative aspects in order to address the criteria specified in the IT key skills. Because the women I interviewed were not exposed to computers in their schooling, some of them needed to start from scratch at university and this needs to be acknowledged and the training provided, if necessary. From these women's experience, it appears that they felt the university was assuming a certain level of competence on entry, and some of them had none or very little. Judy, in particular, was almost phobic about her lack of IT skills and was very concerned that she might not be able to cope with the PGCE course for this reason. Rebecca's IT skills were reports as being non-existent, and she joked:

> *It took me weeks to even just log in, I mean, just logging in was like a major lesson for me (Rebecca: 2).*

Although the undergraduate BITS (Basic Information Technology Skills) programme is available to students, and the social studies students are expected to follow this, none

of the women mentioned it to me. Carmen was very surprised that there was no help available to her when she started one of her assignments and resorted to asking other students and her husband for help. She was not aware of any courses on campus and, as related above, was considering taking a college course during the summer to improve her skills. She described her struggle on one assignment:

> *Nobody showed me how to do that, yet I knew it had to be set out in tables properly, probably if I'd experimented a lot, maybe I'd have found a way of doing it, but it would have taken me a long time to do that, and you'd also have to have the initiative to know where to look, it would have been a long search.. I found that irritating* (Carmen: 3).

She eventually asked her husband to show her, and admitted to feeling foolish when shown how simple the particular task was. It also reflected that she had really struggled, and had not wanted to ask her husband through a sense of pride, yet she knew he would be the knowledgeable one, perhaps because IT was a 'male' skill as internalized by Carmen.

Both the mathematics teacher trainees, Sarah and Ruth, had extensive computer backgrounds, but admitted that their skills could always be stretched to accommodate new ideas. Another teacher trainee, Jenny, also had a working background with computers and admitted that, at the beginning, she thought her skills were sufficient, and even stagnating. However, once she was out on her school placement, she realised that there were other ways of using computers apart from the PC aspect and she was investigating CD ROMs and suchlike for use in language

teaching. All four PGCE students had their own computers at home and tended to do most of their work there. One of the problems mentioned frequently was the lack of facilities at the university. Part of their assessment criteria consisted of using e-mail and the internet, and the only access for the PGCE students was on a Friday afternoon when there was a greater demand than supply of terminals. One woman with children was particularly worried:

> *I think it's very unfair if some people do have time because they haven't got children, and they haven't got to be home at a certain time to actually spend all afternoon typing up their lesson plans, getting it all organised and having it all very neat for their RoPD folders and everything else... and you can't even check your e-mail.. I think it should be limited* (Judy: 3).

The use of IT is very prominent in teacher training, with high expectations of the new teachers who seemed to be very enthusiastic until they arrived at their placements and realised that the facilities there were not as they had expected, and they were unable to carry out their assignments. Many of the staff at the schools were not as computer literate as the trainees and were not as keen to use IT in their lessons whereas the trainees had to teach one class using IT before the end of their first placement in December. If the use of IT is considered a skill, then the high attainment of the newly qualified teachers would need to be sustained in other ways if their schools are not properly equipped so as to allow the women to continually use their skills and to build upon them to keep up with the latest developments in IT.

Asking for help with skills seems to be problematic for some of the women. The attitude seems to be that university is there for you to make what you can from it on your own rather than expect the staff to provide what they feel is training, as in the example above of Carmen who was considering returning to college in the summer to learn the IT skills she needed for her university course rather than expect the help to be provided for her. The women from the access courses still appeared to me to have a self consciousness about their route into university, that they were 'spoon fed' on the access course and now they must make their way through a university education on their own merit and any perceived lack of skills was their own responsibility. The access course was the trial run, and now this was the real thing.

For example, Susanne was struggling with essay writing and was in the process of being assessed for dyslexia, but still felt she had to cope on her own:

> *I'm battling along by myself, moving on from the access course. I feel that I've not been given any skills to write essays, I feel very much in the dark as to actually what they really want; I'm beginning to get an idea, and I think, well, I'll try out all those ideas in the exams and see what happens* (Susanne:3).

The majority of the women interviewed thought that the onus of developing their skills was on themselves, although they would need to be directed on how to do this, with discussion with others. They did not feel that they should be 'taught' as such, but did expect their skills to develop mainly through the work they were doing at university, such as essay writing,

giving presentations, assignments and the presentation of their work for which they expected written feedback, reflecting the embedded model as discussed in chapter 3. They also expected to discuss their work with their tutors and be given guidance on how to improve. This was a very strong thread throughout the interviews, wanting to know how to improve, how to achieve the best they could out of themselves. This reflects the emphasis made by Dearing, as the most important skill of all, 'learning how to learn' (NCIHE, 1987). Francesca recognised that this could become a problem for her; for she could not accept what she felt was second best. She was struggling with one particular course and was frustrated because she could not spend the time required to bring herself up to the standard she had set for herself and that she knew she was capable of:

> *Just getting through things by the skin of my teeth is just not fun, it makes me anxious. But I think I'm just going to have to live with that, with that subject* (Francesca: 3).

Later in the interview, she referred again to this particular course and her determination to master it:

> *. . .there's been a couple of times when I've sat there in the lesson and nearly wanted to cry out of **anger**, actually, it's not anything to do, it's anger that I am not able to do this, so I'm moving heaven and earth now, you know, I'm going to do it if it kills me, but that's me* (Francesca:3).

One of the PGCE students mentioned the skill she hoped to be taught was how to become a teacher. Sarah hoped she would be told how to teach, because she felt that all the books she

had been reading did not actually tell her how to do it but said that teachers need to be able to work things out for themselves:

> *but I wouldn't mind actually being given some pointers as to some of the things that have worked. . . but they don't seem to want to say that, maybe I'm reading the wrong ones* (Sarah:1).

In the PGCE course, where key skills work was intensive, it remained a low key conscious activity for the PGCE students. As reported above, they stated that their own skills were already well developed. The one particular skill frequently expressed was that communication was a necessary part of learning to become a teacher; if one cannot communicate then there is no point attempting to become a teacher. They all expected to develop these skills as part of their course and to put them into practice on an ongoing basis. Ruth felt happy about her own key skills, but felt her priorities were more about applying them to her teaching:

> *Actually thinking about how I want to teach, how I can use the key skills to be effective as a teacher, not actually necessarily acquiring the key skills* (Ruth:3).

She felt that whilst she was not consciously thinking about the key skills when she was planning her work, she was assuming she had them, seeing them more as tools to be used rather than an end in themselves. The two mathematics students assumed they were numerate enough, whilst the two MFL trainee teachers, Jenny and Judy, saw application of number as the weakest area of their skills, but did not really feel concerned as it was not going to be part of what they

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would be doing so did not prioritise its development. The emphasis for the teacher trainees seemed to be the development of their ICT skills which they considered to be most important in terms of their development outside of their teaching practice, something to be assessed in terms of their own development and help sought if they felt inadequate in any way. All four felt fairly confident but were aware of the need to keep up to date.

Francesca, who had worked as a manager in a large retail company before having her last child, thought that developing skills was a vital part of the course she was following and would welcome something explicit in her degree showing her competency in skills in addition to her being an English graduate, seeing it as something that might appeal to employers. However, she was concerned that the skills assessments must be used in a positive way and not as a way of putting pressure on people to always be reflecting on their performance and continually striving to reach targets. From her experience in the retail industry she felt that many people felt pressured into setting targets which they really had no interest in achieving, but thought that this was the only way to keep their jobs. This links back to her experience informing her ability to problematise, and her 'soft' skills being put into action, in an unconscious way. She welcomed the chance to enhance skills other than those she felt were implicit in her course, but had not, as yet, been directed as to how she could do this.

5.4.2: Summary of first research sub-section

This section has analysed the data in terms of seeking to understand how the participants make sense of the skills

which they bring to higher education as mature women. It began with a discussion on self-esteem, highlighting the positive effect on the women who attended access courses, and the various understandings of what access courses were for. There was a dip in confidence just before the women began their courses, when the enormity of what they were about to do was realized. For the PGCE students, however, their self esteem was relatively high, as they already had experience of higher education, so knew better what to expect. Three of them felt more secure in their decision to become a teacher having brought up children.

Secondly, this section addressed how the women perceived their own skills. They were mostly positive, although, using the example of Yasmin, showed the dual nature of being mature. Finally, the analysis shows how the women felt their skills were developed over their time at university. Using the example of Carmen, the frustration of trying to develop their IT skills was demonstrated and seemed to be typical of other women. It was also apparent that some of the women differentiated between skills that can be learned, such as IT, and those skills considered more personal and innate such as presentation skills. Most of the respondents saw the onus of skills development on themselves, not their school or institution. It is not appropriate to draw any conclusions at this point from the data since the responses from the women were so varied that it is not possible to generalize. However, the important issues raised here form part of the discussion in chapter 6.

5.5: Second research sub-section:

This next section moves on to the second research sub-section.

I would like to understand more about the perceptions of mature women students of how institutions of higher education value their skills?

Most participants valued the skills of being mature, of having been in the world and learned about the world from experience, and of having brought up families which demonstrated their organisational and time management skills. This next section reveals how some of the women thought their skills were not being valued. This was particularly the case of the women who had experienced access courses and had been encouraged to see value in their experiences. Access courses also approached learning in a non-traditional way, and most of the women relished the thought of a good discussion in seminars which was how they had experienced their access course. Confidence building and peer support often brought out the discursive side of them, and the onus was generally less on examinations and more on discussion. The following two categories of analysis show how they perceived these skills were valued.

5.5.1: The value of life experience at university

The concept of skills can be problematic, and this idea was discussed in chapter 3, where it was seen by some as something that could be learned rather than an innate attribute of their self. Skills development was considered as less personal than the life experiences the woman had lived

through and sometimes the two meanings overlapped in the interviews. Some of the women felt that having lived through certain situations, sometimes traumatic, it gave them an experience they believed would enhance their studies and something that they could share with others. This idea tended to be more internalised than skills development; it was what had made them what they were, a part of being a woman.

Whereas all life experience is individual, suffering wife beating or being the white single mother of mixed race children is very much a gendered, as well, in the latter, a 'raced' experience. These social issues are often the subject of study in a number of curricula, perhaps mostly through the two schools that the undergraduate participants were attending – the Department of English Studies and more specifically, the School of Sociology and Social Policy.

Of the three students who commenced their degrees in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, Susanne, Rebecca and Carmen, all remarked that they had chosen this subject, amongst other reasons, because they felt it might fit around their own experiences, and it was something that they knew about from their everyday lives. It was related to the world they knew. There may have been other influences, as many access courses are geared towards sociology and psychology and may use life experience to encourage the women to study, and to boost their confidence.   Carmen was encouraged to consider Social Policy at her university interview, and reflected that:

I used to find this in sociology, they'd mention things like the education system, and you'd suddenly think, yeah, I've seen that, or I can see how that fits in, you know, and sort of because you'd actually got practical experience and seen how other people react to things, it sort of actually gave you a deeper perspective because you've actually experienced it, it's not just reading, you do actually have a deeper understanding of, than you are just reading it (Carmen:1).

So Carmen recognised some of herself in the topics she would be studying, and thought that her own experience of having children and having to negotiate the education system on their behalf had given her different insight to someone who may have only been a student through the system.

I will now explore Susanne's story in more depth regarding her perception of how her life experience was valued at university. We have already met Susanne when describing how she was unable to attend early classes because of child-care difficulties.

Susanne moved from London 3 years prior to our initial interview. She wanted a new start away from London for her two young children, as she had been in a physically abusive relationship so came here to do an access course. Susanne is white and her partner was black, so her children are mixed race. She thoroughly enjoyed the experience of learning, and reading, in particular, and originally wanted to become a teacher to fit in around the children's lives. She was 42 when we first met and had led a 'colourful life' which she talked about in detail off tape. Her mother had always called her stupid, and she was just coming to terms with her own intelligence through the access course, but was still very uncertain of her right to a university education. She was always very vocal in her access lessons and was looking forward to a good argument with intelligent people about issues she had direct experience of. She was diagnosed as dyslexic after a few months at university.

That the subject was treated in a more academic way than expected was very much evident in the story of Susanne which I look at in more detail, now, to explore the way she perceived that her experience was not as valued as it had been on the access course, and which became the main reason that she left Central University after the first year. Susanne had completed a humanities access course and her original career plan was to go on to teach in the primary sector. She already held a National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) childcare qualification, so was used to working with young children. Susanne had particularly enjoyed the history module on the access course, but had difficulty remembering names and dates, and got great enjoyment out of the English literature module. Nevertheless, she ultimately opted to read Social Policy and Administration for her degree as she expected to be able to contribute much of her life experience to the discussions. She explained to me why she had chosen sociology over the humanities:

> In the first year, most of what we're studying, I've experienced…and I think, hey, I've lived that, I love a good argument, I mean I'm very vocal in the lessons and I'm quick in my ideas, and my mind, I can't write. So, social policy was, sort of, it gave me a bit of confidence, I know about it, I won't have to remember names, you know, history…Social policy is, is ideas which I can hold on to. I know I'll still have to remember names and dates whatever, but at least I'll be able to know the ideas and so that felt quite comforting, so I went for that one (Susanne:1).

Six months into the course, in the third interview, she struggled with keeping up with the workload and managing her children. She was beginning to feel disillusioned with her course. She enjoyed her subsidiary subject of English literature, and discussed her theories on a particular text with me at great length, but the sociology was not what she had hoped it would be:

> *It's just, you know, the fact that I'm a single parent, I'm poor, my kids are black, you get fed up of sitting listening the whole time about, you know, the problems of society from the top down. Certain lecturers may go on about cultural richness, you know, from the top. I will pipe up, 'so you could say the working class are culturally rich?' 'Yes, we'll talk about that next time'. You know, no, nothing, you know, and it's, I'm well aware, and I knew before I went that I'd be getting this and that's why I very nearly didn't go. I know that they're, you know, they stand very proudly in the lectures and say, 'we are for the elite and this is what we are going to fight for!' so, I knew that, before I went* (Susanne: 3).

I could hear her frustration and anger coming over in the interview. Much more personal and harrowing information of her past life was given to me off-tape so it is not ethical or appropriate to refer to it in detail. We discussed the fact that what she had told me could not be unsaid between us, but she felt it would help me to see how much she had suffered and recovered from, and wanted to share what she felt appropriate with her peers. The quote above is from an instance she recounted in detail, that she felt some tutors were unwilling to depart from their planned curricula to

include someone with direct experience. This particular discussion was concerned with the problems of poor children who were not achieving because of their background and she was defending her point that yes, they could achieve, they only had to look at her, but she felt that the other students could not empathise with her and she felt excluded, the exact opposite of her expectations. She felt her experiences were not valued, and whenever she put forward her own experience, she was stifled. But she felt patronised and humiliated as well (Merrill, 1998; Murphy & Fleming, 1996; West, 1998).

This very much reflects the value of life experience and the fact that Susanne already had a few doubts about attending this type of Russell Group university with her background. So, as well as hoping that her experience would be valued, she also doubted whether her expectations could be fulfilled, feeling that another type of university might have been more welcoming to her. She was however, realistic, and perceived that in a group of young students, typical of this type of university, with a different life experience to her own, it was probably too much to expect anything else:

> *I look at these eighteen year olds and I listen to the lectures and I look at them, and I think, yes, a lot of them are here for very good reasons, they're very nice people, they don't know what our kind of lives are like, I don't expect them to, they're, you know, they've had their own and that's as valid as mine* (Susanne: 3).

Susanne is an example of the different tensions that operate in women's lives, with her fractured identity. There are

multiple issues here of class, race and gender, and how Susanne felt the pull of different roles she had to take, of student, mother and father, for example, as illustrated above. By realising she was dyslexic, it had helped her to understand more about herself and why she behaved in certain ways. She also saw patterns repeating themselves in her children. This was her world as she experienced it and it is not one she wished to compromise, so she withdrew from university to consider other options.

Sexism is linked to other forms of oppression, and in feminist theory, all women are oppressed, but some also belong to other oppressed groups such as by class or race. Susanne was very aware that Central University was a place of privilege, a white middle class community in which she did not sit easily. She was experiencing oppression, in her eyes because of class and race, but conflated the two. This highlights that oppression is not always named, that when her lecturers talked of poor children not being able to achieve, Susanne read it as 'poor, black children', as reflected in her own experience. Kleinman (2008) suggests that universal comments like 'poor children' really masks the meaning 'poor black children' but it is not voiced and thereby perpetuates the discourse of all black people being poor, reflecting cultural ideas of race and class. This was doubly difficult for Susanne to cope with in seminars because she is white, but the attitudes enraged her. She thought that people would not have argued with her so much if she had been black. In terms of the contradictory nature of this discussion, she was angry but could understand why it went on as people knew no better. So having gone into higher education to engage in debate about issues she was experiencing and felt strongly

about, she was still downplaying the inequality by saying she would have been better at a different university, putting the onus on herself to change, that it was her own fault for choosing the wrong institution, internalising the oppression:

> *Because I'm a woman and a mother, I compare the university to a house and it will be the sort of house where you went and there was never any milk in it. I sort of compare it, yeah, if it were a house, there'd never be any milk (laughter). I know I'm being very critical, I am aware of it, and I have, but it's just how I feel at the moment, you know* (Susanne:3).

5.5.2: Different ways mature women work at university

From the analysis of the interview data, there appears to be a number of contradictions of how mature women saw the younger students, and how they thought they were perceived by them. There has been much work on mature women students as a group, but perhaps little on their relationship with other students. The discussions with the participants often veered from feeling inadequate compared to younger people to feeling frustrated at younger people's lack of interest in seminars which did not reflect their own (Hayes, King & Richardson, 1997; Brennan, 1997).

Susanne discussed the fact that young people tend not to talk in seminars and mature people want to talk all the time, they seem to be much more inquisitive and willing to take risks and ask questions. She suggests that there should be a mature students' degree, but admitted that it would not be perceived as worth as much:

I think that basically, and I know this wouldn't work, because it would be seen as a lesser thing, but I really do believe that there should be degrees for eighteen year olds and degrees for mature students who know about life, who can, you know, actually say something and have valid points. I'm not saying that eighteen year olds don't have valid points but they have different kinds of points, they have a different kind of experience, life experience and a different knowledge than we do, and I know it wouldn't work because it wouldn't, you know, if it was a mature student degree, then it wouldn't be as good as an eighteen year old's. (Susanne: 3).

Susanne is reflecting the internalised lack of self esteem, not just as a mature student returning to a male space, but also as a perceived young person's space, the young/old binary becoming apparent here. As an intelligent woman with a lot to offer, she felt suffocated by not being able to express herself as she had with her peers on the access course, and felt insecure in a situation where others were not of the same enthusiasm as she. Yet she realised that hers was not the discourse that was valued by the academy, but that of young people, hence the comment that a mature students' degree would not be valued as much as a more traditional one, which she herself was aspiring to.

Francesca was similarly frustrated by the different approaches to learning of the younger students to herself, so the vignette below gives a little more background on her.

Francesca is a single parent of two children. Before having the children, she worked as a training supervisor for a large retail company. She always wanted to be an actress, but her mother forbad it, and she joined the civil service straight from school. She loves drama, and acts and produces plays at the local amateur theatre. She is well read, and decided to use the local further education college to achieve her dream of reading English at university. Despite a number of financial setbacks, she has always been a very determined woman who was looking forward to engaging with the discipline and improving her mind. She did not want to return to retailing although she had a very successful career there.

Others felt that they had skills in other areas that compensated for their lack in others. Francesca was a training supervisor before she had children and was very good at presentations. I will use Francesca's story to illustrate how she sees this difference, and the pleasures and pain it often caused her. She was very pleased to recount that no one wanted to work with her at first, and the younger students gravitated together, excluding the mature students. After her presentation, it was so successful, everyone wanted to work with her:

> …I'm really pleased that that makes me feel so confident when I'm there because, without being a bighead,… so it's wonderful, you know, it's like, well, **you** might be able to get 99% in an exam, but give me a presentation to do any day…I think a lot of people from the A-Level route have been so tuned in to like, doing an exam, I mean, they're so brilliant, they can just get A after A after A. Give them other things to do and they fall apart at the seams, you know, they need spoon feeding, so it's yes, it's compensatory but it also

gives me a bit of what I like, it gives me a bit of kudos (Francesca: 4).

This led to further discussion on the qualities she as a mature woman brought and how much she perceived it was valued in the marking scheme. This seemed to favour the younger students as outlined in the above quote, that they were better at examinations which carried a much higher weighting than seminars, which Francesca enjoyed most and felt that was the true nature of a university education, the exchange of views and discussion of texts. She was shocked at how the seminars ran. She read widely and was ready for an argument and discussion. Having worked in business, she saw them as meetings. One would do the preparatory reading, have an idea of the issues, read round those issues and be prepared to tackle others' points of view:

> *I'm really geared up and excited about this because I've been interested or I've not liked it or I've got questions and I sit there in a room full of lettuces and it's just horrendous* (Francesca: 4).

She then described the silence, the encouraging tutor, then the dialogue between her and the tutor, the tutor's realisation of this and attempts to draw others in:

> *And they still sit there and they're still looking for the theme they did at A-Level, they've still not moved out of this and all, they are so afraid to be controversial. They are so afraid to say it….but I thought that was what university was about, exploring these things and perhaps being allowed in that framework, to push the*

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boundaries so that we could get something new and
exciting instead of, oh well, we'll stick to the theme and
the narrative (Francesca: 4).

Having discussed all this, her own enthusiasm, her
disappointment and the way the younger students seemed to
feel proud of not having read for the seminar, she reflected:

> *I think, am I mad? Because it's not going to actually,*
> *necessarily give me any more kudos in the exam*
> *because they will swot up on the lectures, which is*
> *really the way the exam works, and that's where they'll,*
> *but I just find it so frustrating and I think that there*
> *should be far more marking for this. We did get*
> *marked for our contribution on one last year and that*
> *was only 10% and if that is, it should be like a continual*
> *assessment, you're doing that reading week by week by*
> *week, it's a course, they want you to have absorbed*
> *that knowledge and you only have the choice of*
> *probably two essays and two questions on the exam out*
> *of about thirty pieces of reading you should have done.*
> *So it's not necessarily unfair, it just seems as if there*
> *should be more because it's important to contribute at*
> *meetings. People like me do not want to sit there and*
> *spout and have a two way conversation but it is very*
> *easy to take over* (Francesca: 4).

These reflections above illustrate the notion of dialogical
exchange that Freire (1972) discusses in his idea of active
learning, that exchange of ideas can create new knowledge,
and that passive learning cannot create new knowledge. His
notion of 'banking education' is the one Francesca illustrates

as her perception of the approach to learning of the younger students, that the lecturer 'deposits' knowledge in the students' empty minds, to be 'withdrawn' and produced in examination situations. Freire also suggests that not only does dialogue increase understanding and create new knowledge, but that it is a co-operative activity that can increase social capital by creating better, thinking, citizens who will go out into the world and make it a better place. The emphasis is on a respectful and fair exchange of views which creates a more critical pedagogy as opposed the mere transmission of 'facts'. Freire calls this praxis, the putting into practice of theoretical knowledge. However, perhaps the younger students are more strategic in their approach to learning, reflecting the discussion in the previous chapter on the massification of higher education, where students are not necessarily wanting to develop their interest in the subject they are studying, but are more concerned with gaining a degree and moving on to employment outside of their subject area.

Since Francesca was at school, as has been shown in the previous chapter on the education of women, the curriculum had become much more assessment driven, and whereas Francesca and her peers could have left school with virtually no qualifications, they would have had little trouble finding employment, suitable for their gender and their future position in society. With much more emphasis on SATS, GCSEs and A-levels, School League Tables and suchlike students who are being educated now have been taught differently, with much more emphasis on how to pass particular tests. For example, at the start of a two year GCSE course, students will be given the specifications of their

subject, and perhaps, key questions which were to be examined. Teachers unconsciously shaped their classroom behaviour to the imperatives of this system and perpetuated the discourse. As Foucault discusses, systems of power can be resisted if the particular discourse is recognised for what it is. However, even if teachers do acknowledge that they are part of this discourse, they can feel powerless to change it, as, if by not 'teaching to the test' their students fail, they may no longer have a job. This may go some way to explaining why Francesca felt her fellow students were 'lettuces', as they would have been subject to this intensive assessment driven type of education in a much more potent way than she herself was, and it was still the expectation of this type of education when they reached university level.

Francesca felt very strongly that a university education is for life, but those who were good at exams attained a better degree than perhaps a risk-taker like herself. She was astonished that there was no training or workshops on how to give presentations; she believed it is such an important aspect of real life, especially for getting a job in the first place:

> And they are going out of university possibly with a
> higher degree than someone who is taking risks with
> their education, because they want to learn and
> develop, and people who took sort of languages and all
> these various things are all coming out saying, I've got
> a first in that, a first in that. I just think, well, OK, you
> can now speak five languages but you can't hold a
> conversation about a book you've read! That's not
> getting people moving on; it's not helping them go out

into the world. Actually being able to explain how you can and putting it into practice, that's why people have such problems once they get into the workplace. I noticed that with graduates when I was working (Francesca: 4).

Francesca's answer to this was to suggest increasing the percentage mark for presentations, and to actually make presentation skills compulsory learning and assessment. She accepted she probably had a natural aptitude for this, but others did not necessarily have it. She felt that there had been adequate preparation in access, but would have liked more on exam technique because:

It's not my life's ambition to be really brilliant at exams, I just want to get a good degree which has become more and more important to me because I've now seen something I want and I need to get a good degree to get it. I want to do the MA, it's really important to me to do it, it's a dream come true that it's there (Francesca: 4).

So Francesca was becoming strategic in her approach as she needed an upper second classification to apply for the master's degree, but had a fear of exams as they made her panic. So, she had to make choices which went against what she believed in order to gain her degree which would lead on to better things for her. This can be compared to the perception of the younger students also wanting their degree as the next step in their career, too (Smith & Webster, 1997; Scott, 1995). But for Francesca, it was not just a means to an end, she believed that a university education was an

intellectually stimulating experience in itself, and still felt frustrated that she was not getting this stimulation, but was now thinking ahead to the next degree and perhaps setting her hopes on that.

5.5.3: Summary of second sub-section

This section has demonstrated two aspects in detail of how some of the women felt their skills were valued. Firstly, using the example of Susanne, it has been demonstrated how she had expected her life experience to be valued, but instead was made to feel devalued. She felt devastated that the subject was de-personalised and her contributions were not valued by the tutors. She also felt oppressed by the off-hand manner of some of the students and felt oppressed by their insensitive comments.

Secondly, using Francesca as an example, the different ways of working between most of the younger students and the mature students has been demonstrated. Francesca excelled at presentations and discussions, yet felt the mark scheme was loaded towards examinations. As she believed a university education was about discussion and analysis, she felt disappointed in both the reaction from the younger students who seemed unwilling to participate in the seminars, and the value given to these seminars. The system was unfair to mature students and her skills of which she was proud were undervalued. Here research finding number three becomes apparent. It consists of two sub-findings because they both link to the sub-section of the area for investigation of how the women perceive their skills to be valued in higher education, but are discrete areas for discussion within it:

> **a) The higher education courses followed by some of the women did not always value their life experience, which they <u>had</u> been encouraged to value on their access courses**
>
> **b) Some were disappointed that the type of education they had engaged in on the access course was not the same as in higher**

There have been a number of studies on the importance of valuing life experience, reported in chapter 2, (for example, West, 1998; Murphy & Fleming, 1998 and Merrill, 1998) but little on the different ways of working between access courses and higher education, apart from Hayes, King & Richardson's study (1997) where they warn that the disparity could be the cause of failure in some cases. This significant finding is discussed in detail in chapter 6.

5.6: Third research sub-section:

The next section analyses whether the women in my study have a different view on their skills after having completed their course in higher education.

I would like to understand more about how mature women's perceptions of their skills change through undertaking degree courses.

In this section, I explore how the women articulate their skills after they have completed their university studies, and whether they still value the skills they brought with them. In order to investigate this, the interviews focused on their career intentions, and how they would 'sell themselves' to

employers. There then follows a section on the career destinations of the women and for those I was still able to interview, some comments from them about their employment.

5.6.1: How the women articulate their skills in employment situations

A number of participants spoke positively at their initial interview of the skills they felt they had developed over the years through work and childcare and hoped that these skills would be of positive benefit during their studies. Many had attended access courses which stress the positive aspects of being mature students, and encourage women in particular to think of these skills in a more generic and positive way. Indeed, access courses focus very much on building up self esteem of returning students, as this is often low when they begin their courses. Feminism has raised the aspirations for many who began their lives in dead end jobs or who went straight into marriage and motherhood. It has allowed them to see the value of skills which they may previously have taken for granted, and which women were often guided by their mothers to fit them for domesticity and caring. The case of Yasmin, 'excusing' her modelling career was discussed above, and is a good example of this.

Whilst the women used these skills in order to perform well and cope with university life, some felt that when they applied for jobs after graduating, it would be the academic skills they had developed that they would stress. This is despite the fact that they had been encouraged to audit all their skills during their first year in particular. So whilst the skills developed in

the female sphere of the home were valued by the women, they would not be explicit about where they had gained these skills.

As a university is traditionally seen as a male space, despite widening participation to include others, the perception of many of the women was that skills learned there were worth more than skills learned elsewhere in the female sphere. This is reflected in chapter 2 on the education of women in the example of the devaluing of the profession of doctor as more women join that particular workforce (Sunday Times, 2004). Conversely, the status of nursing is achieving greater status as more men chose this career (Kleinmann, 2008).

Most of the participants had children and had spent some time at home bringing them up. They were fully aware of the skills they had developed therein, and articulate them in a variety of ways. The most common one was time management, being able to multi task due to the needs of running a house and sometimes a part-time job as well. Some were worried how they would fit everything in, but had thought it through and enlisted family members to be available and help out. One woman had planned to do all her reading after her children had been put to bed.

Francesca was keenly aware of her own skills development through motherhood, yet declared unequivocally that she would not articulate these skills in those terms at a job interview. Following a long discussion on how she managed her degree as a single parent of two young children, one at school and one in nursery, and had managed to attend all her classes and her work in on time, I asked if she would speak

about how she had done this in a job interview in order to illustrate her skills. Her reply was:

> *My goodness, you're going to give some manager a complete heart attack. Not only has he got a mother who's going to be off every two minutes with the children with measles, but he's also got a slapper on his hands… this is political, it's about women's issues and it's about a patriarchal system which overpowers all forms of employment* (Francesca: 3).

So, although she was proud of her achievements in balancing her two separate spheres as a student and a mother, she still did not feel able to articulate that in a positive way in an interview situation. There are assumptions in her comment that the interviewer would be male, but whether they are valid assumptions or not, they still have a bearing on her feelings of value, thus perpetuating that feeling. It also reveals how she thought others perceived single parents, and mothers who worked. Having interviewed prospective employees herself, she knew that asking about domestic arrangements was seen as prejudicial, but only at the interview level, but did not think it had changed the overall ideology, so volunteering skills learned in the domestic field might be seen as inappropriate, and not encouraged.

5.6.2: Jobs for the girls

Where are they now? This section will follow up what the women in the study have been doing since they graduated or left university. I did not keep in contact with all the women after they had graduated, but have been able to interview

some of them recently and the following table shows some of the details about their subsequent employment destinations:

Table 5.2: Destinations of the main cohort

	School/subject	Employment destination
Anya	English	Unemployed, never completed her degree due to family problems
Francesca	English	Senior Lecturer in Drama, Local 6th Form College
Wendy	English	Lost touch after she graduated
Yasmin	English	Did not complete as a participant after two interviews
Carmen	Social Policy & Administration	Unemployed, does part time marking for EFL in the summer months
Rebecca	Sociology	Teaching part time at F E College where she did her Access Course
Elizabeth	Social & Cultural Studies	Withdrew from university before starting her course, no longer in touch
Sasha	Social & Cultural Studies	Withdrew after 2 weeks, she works at home helping her husband, a GP when required (She is a qualified nurse)
Susanne	Social Policy & Administration	Withdrew from university after one year, took courses in jewellery making, then left the city all together to join family
Sarah	PGCE Mathematics	Teaching mathematics at local comprehensive on 0.8 contract by choice, likes one day with her children who are now teenagers. Began an MA, but didn't like it, so gave up
Ruth	PGCE Mathematics	Teaching mathematics at her local comprehensive
Jenny	PGCE MFL French	Taught in a school for a short period, then *La Jolie Ronde* on Saturdays, now has two children and teaches one evening a week at the local F E College
Judy	PGCE MFL French	Teaching French and Literacy at a comprehensive school a short distance from her home

- Of the original 13, 5 had left university before completion of their courses, or had withdrawn from this project (Elizabeth, Sasha, Anya, Susanne, Yasmin)
- Of the 4 PGCE, all 4 are in teaching (Sarah, Ruth, Judy, Jenny)
- Of the other 3, I was able to contact, 2 were in teaching (Francesca, Rebecca) and the other did summer examination marking and was considering becoming a class room assistant (Carmen)
- Wendy I could not find.

As can be seen from table 5.2, all those who I have been in contact with have gone into employment within the educational sector.

Carmen, who gained an upper second class degree in Social Policy and Administration was very pleased with her result and saw herself as a role model for her children. I interviewed her after she had been graduated for two and a half years, and she was still unemployed. She looked back on her degree and stated that she thought there was prejudice against women, especially older women with children, and that one should not leave it until after 30 to go into higher education if one wanted employment:

> *I'd been at home with the kids, and not had recent employment [before access and university]. All the young people that got the same as me are in employment. Maybe they are more mobile, you're very settled when you've got kids, but some were local* (Carmen: 6).

After 10 months of applying for jobs, she had lost heart. She wanted to work for the council, preferably in housing, 'nothing really grand', and suggested that employers 'don't realise what skills you've got'. She did not want to take this personally, but never got as far as an interview situation where she thought she could demonstrate her ability. She had considered teaching, but at the time of the interview said she did not have the confidence, and was thinking about the position of classroom assistant as she has dealt with children (her own). The only work she has is during the summer, marking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) scripts:

> *It's casual marking. An academic sweatshop. You go to [the office] and sit and mark in teams. You get a mark scheme and sit there from 8.30 until 5. There's not much autonomy (laughs) (Carmen: 6).*

She went to Connexions to see if she could get help finding employment and they thought she was someone's mum. She told me of her frustration of being at home as a prison cell, and she craved social interaction. Her disappointment at having completed her degree and not being able to use it came over very strongly:

> *There's only so much you can do. I'm not going to Tesco's, I think I should be worth more than that. I'm a bit of a snob. You are more than that! (Carmen: 6).*

Yet she does not regret working for her degree, she has made some friends and has become a more critical being which has enriched her life, she thinks she is now 'more rounded'.

5.6.3: Summary of third research sub-section

This section focussed on the participants after they had completed their degrees or PGCEs. It appeared that skills gained in the home were not seen as valuable as skills gained in university, and that, whilst the skills were valued by the women, they did not think they would be valued by employers. The table of employment destinations shows that the women I have been able to contact all worked in education, but in the part–time, low paid sectors, and using the example of Carmen, has shown that one woman has been unable to find employment in her chosen field.

These conclusions lead to research finding number 4, which again has been divided into two:

> **a) In employment situations, some of the women were not willing to articulate the skills they had previously developed in the home, but used examples of skills from their degree courses because they thought they would be taken more seriously by employers.**
>
> **b) Most of the women in my study, despite wishing to pursue other areas of interest, have taken employment in the educational sector.**

This new finding regarding the reluctance to articulate previously developed skills has not been identified in any previous research studies, as far as I am aware. The reasons for this will be considered in the following chapter.

5.7: Summary of Chapter

This chapter has set out the analysis of data, using Harris and Brooks' typology (1998) to categorise the themes emerging. Although useful, the typology did not encapsulate fully the complexity of the women's lives and often, the categories overlapped. However, because of the nature of my enquiry, much of the data sat in the dispositional category, because the methodology used emphasised the importance of lived experience.

The overarching research area of investigation was broken down into three separate questions and each one was used as a category for analysis within the dispositional factors. Extracts from the interviews from the women were used to exemplify the points of analysis, and short cameos were given of some of the women to aid understanding of their situation.

The following chapter will return to the main points of analysis regarding the women's skills and their perception of these and any changes over time. The discussion will focus on the implications of the research for policy, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how some mature women experience higher education.

Chapter 6: Discussion of findings

6.0: Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings of the research. These finding were revealed in chapter 5, and will be presented together below. The ideas will be discussed in relation to the theoretical stance I have taken, based upon a feminist approach informed by the work of both Freire and Foucault. After each section, there will be a discussion of the implications for practice of each of the findings, and then a summary of these. There then follows a section on the participants of the study who did not complete their studies, or did not continue with my study. A reflection on the methodology is then presented, including a critique of the typology that was used.

6.1: Findings and discussion

The discourse of widening participation and lifelong learning has encouraged a number of mature women to re-enter education. The government-sponsored access courses offered the women a supportive atmosphere in which to prepare for higher education, both academically and through developing the confidence and self esteem with which to do so. As the acknowledged 'third way' into higher education, access courses are seen as an attractive alternative to studying A-levels, which many might see as a barrier to their success. Access courses can address the exclusion felt by a number of women denied the opportunity of further and higher education for various reasons when they left school.

The attraction of access courses and the government discourse around this is that those who did not have the chance to access higher education in the past can now do so, and this will raise the economic prosperity of the nation. This, in turn, will allow the participants to reap the economic rewards themselves (Access to higher education website http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/ accessed 28/08/09).

There have been a number of studies of access courses, often focussing on working class women, and class identity and how many women apply for post-92 universities rather than pre-92 institutions. Women in such studies often said they felt more comfortable with the approach of post-92 universities to mature students (Brine & Waller, 2004; Reay, 2003; Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003). This study has not been based around class; however, it is situated in a university which is part of the Russell Group, so the experiences of the participants in this research do not necessarily reflect previous work on the destinations of successful access candidates. Class was an important aspect of their identity for some of the women, as self-designated, but for others, it was not prominent in their responses. This research adds to the body of knowledge on how mature women students, most of whom completed access courses and studied in a Russell Group university felt their skills were, or were not valued, and can thus inform practice.

The study was focussed on a small number of women in one institution so general claims are not being made, and conclusions drawn are based upon a detailed investigation of this small group. As discussed in chapter 4, studying the individual experiences of mature women may reveal wider

implications of the problems related to the wider social structures of society. This in turn can lead to changes that could be made of benefit to a wider group in society. I will now reiterate the findings from the research and discuss each in turn. The new findings produced by my study, and not found in any previous studies, will then be discussed in more detail.

The four main findings from the research are:

Finding one:
- Institutional support was not adequate for mature students and there was no central source of reference that could co-ordinate their needs.

Finding two:
- The influence of significant others, (husbands, partners, parents, peers) whether positive or negative, was seen as important in the women's self identity as mature women in higher education.

Finding three:
a) The higher education courses followed by some of the women did not always value their life experiences, which they **had** been encouraged to value on their access courses.

b) Some were disappointed that the type of education they had engaged in on access courses was not the same in higher education.

Finding four:

a) In employment situations, some of the women were not willing to articulate the skills they had previously developed in the home, but used examples of skills from their degree courses because they thought they would be taken more seriously by employers.

b) Most of the women in my study, despite wishing to pursue other areas of interest, have taken employment in the educational sector.

The findings will now be discussed in more detail with reference to the literature reviews of chapters 2 and 3, the theoretical literature from chapter 4 and the analysis of the data from chapter 5. Each section will also include implications for practice.

6.1.1: Finding one:

- Institutional support was not adequate for mature students and there was no central source of reference that could co-ordinate their needs.

Although access courses are open to men and women, the majority of students on them are usually women (see Pascall & Cox's studies on women in higher education, 1993a; 1993b). Often, they returned to college looking for something to update their skills ready for employment, and found themselves on access courses. Rebecca was not even sure what the implications of an access course were as she missed the first few weeks and suddenly found herself applying to university. Others, such as Francesca, knew about access

courses and went straight to the local college to enrol. These courses tend to be geared around the school day, and the colleges will usually have child care facilities for those with pre-school children. One of the local colleges had a lunchtime room specifically for mature students where they could socialise and spend time with their children.

Most of the women accepted that the same level of support was not going to be available at university, but they did expect a certain level of service. The post-1992 universities seemed to have better services for mature students than the pre-1992 institutions (Reay, 2003). Central University, a pre-1992 university and member of the Russell Group, does not appear to have the support mechanisms in place which mature students might need. Some of my participants had been offered places at other post-92 universities as well, but chose this one, because of its reputation as a leading university - it had more kudos - and because of this, some like Anya, felt honoured to be accepted. I was also offered places at both universities in this city and chose the pre-1992 over the post-92 institution for the same reason, even though my needs as a mature student may have been better served at the post-92 university.

Before finalising this study, I tried to find information provided specifically for mature students on Central University's website, but was unable to. I telephoned the Student Support Office where I was told that there was no such facility and the respondent guided me to the Student Union. Ironically I was told that a mature student had telephoned recently, asking the same question. A representative of the Students' Union informed me that a

mature students' officer had recently been appointed and directed me to the website, but this had unfortunately not been updated. There was one reference to this officer in an article on the website and it is a male officer. Clearly a male mature students' officer is well placed to support male mature students, but as the majority of mature students are female, it is questionable whether this was a suitable appointment to a role where an understanding and empathy for the concerns of mature women and their needs is paramount. Even so, this officer is in place for mature students once they become students and there is still no one central service dedicated to helping mature students with their enquiries either before they begin their course or if they are just enquiring about becoming a student.

The Russell Group website[11] has a number of policy statements on, for example, A-Levels, diplomas, subject choice and contact hours, but nothing on mature students. When I contacted them, I was told that this was up to each individual university to decide and oversee admissions policies and that the policy statements were made in response to common enquiries from the media and general public. Presumably then, no mature students have contacted them to enquire about facilities and policy towards mature students. As part of a wider study, Leathwood and Reay (2009) noted that university websites tend to promote their courses with pictured of young attractive people. Amongst other groups such as the visibly disabled and 'unattractive larger students', these websites were also lacking in visibility of mature students, men and women. Those featured were conventionally attractive, young and slim.

The mature women in my study who had young children, not just those who had taken access courses, needed to organise their childcare, and would have liked timetables ahead of week 1. Ruth tried time and again to telephone for this information, and could not get a reply. Others commented that friends attending other universities had received information well in time for them to prepare for university, whereas they had not.

In summary, there were a number of concerns which could have been addressed if there had been a designated person or help line. For example, Susanne's difficulty in attending the early morning lectures; Judy being unable to access computers on a Friday afternoon as it was the only time during the week that she was not on teaching practice; and Carmen's need for IT training which was available for undergraduates but she was not aware of it. These worries may not have been solved, but a compromise may have been reached to take some of the worry away from the women and they would hopefully at least have known where to access help and advice.

This shows a lack of understanding of the different needs of mature women students, and leads me to believe that the assumption is that they should fit into the system as 'other', as outsiders opposed to the norm, rather than the system changing to accommodate them. The majority of students in higher education are now female, and has been since 1996-7 and similarly, the majority of students are classed as mature at 21+, (Times Higher Education, 2004) but this does not

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[11] (http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/policy-statements.html accessed 27/08/09

seem to be reflected in the way some universities are organised. Even though most students are no longer under 21, mature students are still referred to as 'non-traditional'.

6.1.1.1: Recommendations for practice

If universities want to increase the numbers of mature students, particularly women, practical and accessible structures must be put in place to encourage them to apply to the university and to guide them in how to obtain the services they need before and during their studies. The needs of mature students are well researched, and as Reay (2003) for example, points out, the majority of women in her study chose to attend post-92 universities because the support was there for mature women. However, for the women in this study, most had deliberately chosen Central University.

It is acknowledged that mature women students bring with them a wealth of experience and enthusiasm, (see for example, Anderson and Williams, 2001; Baxter & Briton, 1999; Kennedy, 1997) and this needs to be encouraged, but if the practical and emotional support is not there, they will go elsewhere, or even not apply to university at all, and this becomes wasted potential. Using the discourse of academia as stated at the beginning of this section, the economic prosperity of the nation will not be well served. Therefore, some universities in the Russell Group need to rethink their support for mature students, particularly women. They should perhaps take lessons from post-92 universities and colleges that provide access courses and could consider different models of provision that might encourage more mature women students to apply to study there.

6.1.2: Finding two:

- The influence of significant others, (husbands, partners, parents, peers) whether positive or negative, was seen as important in the women's self identity as mature women in higher education.

The area of spousal support for mature women returners has been well researched, as has the influence of parents at the time of the women leaving school (Wisker, 1996 and Tittle & Denker, 1980, for example). However, my research has shown how important the role played by parents has been in influencing the women's decisions in returning to learning, if only to prove that they were capable of gaining entry to university. Elizabeth was denied a chance to attend university after leaving school, even though her brothers were given that opportunity and she claimed that she was as good as they were. She had internalised the unfairness of the decision, but also wanted to prove that she was able now. Other scholars have also investigated the influence of peers, and this research shows how important peer support was. Sasha gave up her course because Elizabeth withdrew, they had worked together on the access course and had planned to do the same at university, and Sasha had felt out of place on her own. This research has shown how negative other women were towards some of the women, which can be illustrated by the self-policing metaphor from Foucault (Foucault, 1980; Lukes, 1997). This is a very interesting area for research, which I would like to pursue, but this study is more concerned with the women's skills, so I will move on to discuss the analysis of the dispositional factors, as outlined in chapter 5.

6.1.3: Finding three:

a) The higher education courses followed by some of the women did not always value their life experiences, which they **had** been encouraged to value on their access courses.

b) Some were disappointed that the type of education they had engaged in on access courses was not the same in higher education.

This finding has been split into two sub-sections because of the importance of both, and they will be discussed separately below. The data on which this finding is based are from the interviews with the women who were following courses as undergraduates, and all but one had followed an access course before attending university.

6.1.3.1: Finding three a)

a) The higher education courses followed by some of the women did not always value their life experiences, which they **had** been encouraged to value on their access courses.

Access courses are very much about increasing self-confidence and self-esteem in their participants (Simms, 1996; Pearce, 1990; Parr, 2001; McGivney, 2004). For many, this is the first time they may have been studying since leaving school. They would not have the traditional qualifications necessary for higher education, hence being on

the access course, and would need encouragement that they are capable. For some it was a second chance, for others, a long cherished wish to try for university.

In order to increase self-esteem, the women are encouraged to reflect on the skills they have gained since leaving school, based upon their lives in employment and bringing up families. Most women generally do not see the value of domestic work in the wider world, as it is given little value in the society in which we live, although they do acknowledge it amongst themselves, as reflected in the interviews with me, for example. Skills such as time management, organisation, communication, diligence, negotiation and working with others are all skills that are part of women's lives either in the domestic sphere or the world of work. These are all skills that will help them in their academic career and are those skills that employers say they want. Learning takes place in informal settings as well as formal, and takes a diversity of forms, and this type of learning is often considered as 'non-traditional' learning through the life course (Bourne, 1995, for example, studied different leisure activities linked to learning and skills). However, 'non-traditional' suggests another binary, with traditional being the norm, and non-traditional as 'other' therefore not as valued.

Thus women on access courses are encouraged to value their life experiences, and this often helps in the choice of subject to study at university. Although two of the women, Carmen and Susanne, initially wanted to work with children as primary school teachers, they enjoyed the access courses on sociology and could identify with many of the topics studied,

and so decided to follow through with a degree in Social Policy rather than in teaching.

Life experiences are all about identity, and certainly the first life history interviews with the women showed the varied lives they had led since leaving school. Some, such as Elizabeth, Sarah, Sasha and Wendy had what they described as a comfortable typical life of marriage and domesticity and bringing up children. On the other hand, some of the others had led unsettled lives, moving from one job to another, never finding fulfilment. Judy had failed her law exams and had internalised that failure as letting her father down. She took dead-end jobs and travelled before facing her demons and deciding what she wanted to do. Francesca had worked in the civil service and for a retail company, whilst always hankering after a career in drama. She kept up this interest in amateur dramatics before deciding to embark on a degree course in English which would keep her interest in drama. Susanne ran away from home as her mother treated her badly and called her stupid. She made a disastrous abusive marriage, but had two children to care for now as a single mother. In order to keep her children fed and clothed she had sometimes had to take drastic measures which were discussed in more detail off tape. The details of these disclosures cannot be analysed as part of the data, but I cannot 'un-know' them.

These identities are fragile and multi-faceted. Many of the women found that their separate selves were in conflict as students, mothers, daughters and carers, as well as wives and partners, and in some cases, workers. This was explored fully in chapter 5, when discussing what Fonow and Cook

(1991) describe as a 'structural rupture point', a break away from one identity to encompass another. Returning to education challenges their identities and can lead to a number of re-constructions of that identity, both positive and negative, of being a woman. Weil (1986) calls this 'learner identity' and the construct for her consists of, 'personal, social, socio-political, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning as integrated over time' (Weil, 1986, p 223). As mature women, this identity may have felt like an alienation from prescribed and internalised social roles. This identity can be seen to have fluctuated and changed for the women in this study, and for some there were powerful consequences. For others, the learner identity becomes an alternative identity that they can step into and out of as subject rather than object, thus separating their academic and domestic spheres. Ideas of essentialism of what it is to be a woman which they may have internalised through their socialisation were now being challenged (Reinharz, 1992; hooks, 1982). For some, there was an element of risk involved, and the fear of failure often manifested itself in their refusal to see further than their first year at university, and to joke that they would soon get the 'tap on the shoulder' and be asked to leave. For the women who attended access courses, there was the risk of the transition from the familiar setting to the unknown and this caused them to re-question their abilities, reflected in the fears expressed in the second round of interviews just before their courses were about to start.

The most compelling of the women's stories that illustrates this fragile identity is that of Susanne, whose frustration at not being able to contribute her own personal experience of what was being studied was discussed in chapter 5. She felt

the whole experience of higher education was hollow, that she was unable to put her point of view forward and challenge the discourses of poverty, race, single parents, disability and working class people. She felt her responses were thought unacademic, and that she was somehow attempting to undermine the established academic canon. This was why she had chosen Social Policy in order to add to the knowledge with her own personal experience, but her perception was that the tutors and other students were not interested. The tensions of disappointment and the added unhappiness of not being able to look after her children sufficiently when having to leave them in the playground early in the morning, made her decide to leave the university. She felt very bitter about the way she had been treated, which was in opposition to the way she had been encouraged to feel in the access course. In terms of social justice, Susanne's story was silenced. By ignoring her experience, the opportunity for a deepened understanding of a particular problem was missed, but also a chance to rethink assumptions. 'Poor black children cannot achieve' was the assumption of one particular group, and Susanne wanted to explain that she was poor, her children were black, she was a single parent, yet her expectations of her children were high. Rather than engage in dialogue with her, she perceived that others did not want to know, and thus a chance to change people's thinking was lost, and a voice was silenced. This seemed particularly ironic in a subject that perceives itself as one that questions society in order to transform it.

As can be seen from the example above, sharing life experience can be soul destroying, but in the case of Anya, it could have had a lasting effect on how people saw her. When

she mentioned in a seminar that she had been in a 'mental institution', the other students fell silent, and wanted to move on without discussing it. She had wanted to share this in order to show there was no stigma attached to it, and it was relevant as they were discussing the fragmentation and displacement of women's lives, and loss of control. She realised she had made a mistake, that people would talk outside of the seminar and she would be known as the 'mad woman in the attic'[12]. Anya also had seven children and saw this as positive, and something which gave her a wealth of experience and knowledge that could help the younger students, but through a number of bad experiences that she related to me, she decided, 'I thought I'd better let it slide' (Anya: 3).

Life experience from the world of work was also encouraged to be valued on access courses. Francesca's story, also explored in chapter 5, illustrates this. Having worked in retail as a training manager, she was very good at presentations. She was confident in seminars and felt this was where she shone. The younger students did not particularly want to work with her in group presentations until she gave what she described herself as a brilliant session, and then the other students were keen to work with her, so the other students valued her contributions. However, she soon realised that the marks she received for presentations and seminars were small compared with the percentage of marks for examinations. Although Francesca enjoyed seminars very much, she decided that she would have to put more energy into examination technique in order to obtain her upper second class degree which she needed for her Masters degree

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[12] This was a reference to both 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and 'Jane Eyre'

in drama. So she realised that she had to 'play the game' to achieve a long cherished ambition.

These skills and experiences are not just part of learning, but are part of a person's identity, and to reject that experience is to reject the person (Knowles, 1980). During the life history interviews I conducted, many of the women told me their stories, and it was obviously painful for them to talk about their past, and quite emotional, too, for both of us. Bel hooks (1982) warns that sharing experiences with others can be a painful experience, so to have that experience rejected in a public forum could be doubly painful and a personal rejection.

There needs to be a deeper understanding of what non-traditional learners such as mature women bring to higher education and what they can contribute to knowledge, in order not to have this experience dismissed as anecdotal. If lifelong learning is to be successful, there needs to be a way of valuing all experience, not just that theorised in books. Pedagogy for social justice should make all learners feel valued and empowered in the construction of new knowledge. As Freire points out:

> *The pedagogy of the oppressed, [is] a pedagogy which must be forged **with**, not **for** the oppressed (be they individuals or whole peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity* (Freire, 1972, p 25).

Susanne was challenging the claims to truth, of who can speak and create knowledge in society. These internalised values, or regimes of truth (Foucault, 1974) were being tested, and her experience was not considered part of the

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curriculum. So the hidden curriculum that keeps the power structures in place and reproduces them was confirmed, and no new female-oriented knowledge was created using Susanne's contribution.

In the vocational field, Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) allows unpaid work competencies to be accredited towards a qualification as the skills do overlap with those skills required in work. McGivney (1999) reports that employers are reluctant to recognise these, because of the rigid demarcation between paid and unpaid work, another binary women have to face. The assumption is that what is learned and put into practice in the domestic sphere is of little value in the world of work. So, the women in my study will be socialised by this thinking and realise that they need to promote 'marketable' skills if they do not want it to appear that they will leave work for family reasons, if they are putting the skills developed in the home above those developed in higher education.

This leads to the next of my findings, about the type of education some of the undergraduate participants in my study expected to receive.

6.1.3.2: Finding three b)

> b) Some were disappointed that the type of education they had engaged in on access courses was not the same in higher education.

The access courses that the women followed prepared them well for a critical higher education, instilling them with confidence in their abilities and encouraging them to

participate in discussions and develop the skills and abilities they needed for higher study. Mostly working in small groups, the students were able to bring their own experiences to the table. Assessments were usually continuous and by assignment rather than examinations, and therefore there was constant feedback and a chance to discuss their work with the tutors and each other. The emphasis was on analysis of texts, including books and films. Various complementary subsidiary courses could be taken, so one access course, for example, had a module on art, one on history and another on European Institutions, drawing together the sociological issues relevant to the main course. So, it can be viewed as a broad liberal education that empowered the individual and gave them a broad knowledge rather than a narrow field of study, with the expectation of student critical involvement. For some, it made them realise that they were not 'failures' at school, but had a gendered schooling where they may not have been valued.

The expectations of higher education were high, as many found the access courses stimulating and for many such as Susanne, as something magical that they had never had the chance to experience before. Although the women in my study expected higher education to be more difficult than the access course, they expected it to be more of the same, but possibly even more engaging and challenging.

As discussed in chapter 2, the 'massification' and 'commodification' of higher education has led to a change in teaching (Smith & Webster, 1997; Scott, 1995 and various work by Barnett, particularly 1997, 2005). Academics are under pressure to publish, and chapter 2 explored the tension

between research and teaching, showing how research and teaching have become a binary, with research being valued above teaching, particularly in those research-led universities of the Russell Group (Nadin, 1997; Elton, 2000; McNay, 2003). Classes have become larger, and increasingly taught by part time staff and post graduate students. With an increase in the number of students combined with the assessment-led changes to teaching in university departments, a diverse student body in terms of their ability and skills in preparation for higher education has emerged. All these factors have had an impact on the type of education offered to undergraduates. Yet, university still remains a male space, one that mirrors society's power structures and oppressive forces, which favours the 'traditional' white, male middle to upper class student. It is not a place where authentic debate on the curriculum is encouraged. This was voiced by Susanne who felt she could contribute to knowledge since her own consciousness of oppression was more advanced than that of her younger peers and possibly her tutors.

This study has shown how the expectations of some of the mature women have not been met. Francesca's story, related in chapter 5, illustrates this difference, where she refers to the younger students as 'lettuces', who just sit there and are not willing to engage in discussions, or at least are only willing to discuss what they already know. Francesca was aware that she was dominating the seminars but she had prepared well and had lots of issues to discuss with the entire group, not just the tutor. This was part of her nature, to explore all avenues of a particular text:

I never just read a novel, if I've read something and enjoyed it I've gone into the history, the biography, the political situation, I've looked at what someone else has written about it, and I've read bits of philosophy just because I've enjoyed it (Francesca: 5).

Studying English for Francesca was about critically analysing the text in the context of when and where it was written, stripping away the ideology and thinking behind it, deconstructing the text and comparing her own critique with that of others. This was not something that happened suddenly on her access course, but it did give her a platform on which to discuss and debate with others, and a direction in which to situate her skills and abilities. She perceived that others laughed at her for being so intense when she talked in this way in social occasions with her friends. The interview from which the above quotation was taken was conducted after Francesca had finished her degree, and she was reflecting on the development of her skills and what she had learned about herself at university.

She commented that this discrepancy between younger and more mature students would not change until the system of school education changed to become more critical and less assessment driven:

I'm convinced that is a fault of A-levels. I mean, I still think that A-levels are far too tunnel-visioned and people can get through and get very, very high marks without doing anything other than learn things off by heart (Francesca:5).

She also thinks that universities should make it clear that studying English is not just about reading books, that it should be about presenting information and for people who are interested in the historical, political and theoretical contexts as well. Her perception of A-levels that fits the Freirian 'banking' concept of education (Freire, 1972) is not what she considers an undergraduate degree to be composed of. In Francesca's view, the students in her seminars were uncritically accepting what they had been taught in school in a culture of silence, and not challenging the *status quo* in a way that she had been taught on her access course.

Interestingly, Susanne considered a 'mature students' degree' would suit her and other mature students better, alongside the traditional degree that young people attain. The former would be based upon more discussion and debate, looking at the injustice of society and collectively trying to change it, or at least understand the different perspectives of the participants. This would perhaps be closest to the Freirian model, where participants, including the tutor, engage in dialogue and examine why people think the way they do. Participants would all learn together and create new knowledge. This new knowledge would include the lived experiences of the mature women and challenge the mystification (Freire, 1985, p 116) of the world by those who control the discourse of education, and the false consciousness that many people internalise as 'the way things are'.   However, Susanne realised that a mature students' degree would not be valued as much as the other one, even though it would be more critical. She was referring to the traditional/non-traditional binary once more, where she

understood that being non-traditional was being different and 'other' once more, outside of the dominant discourse.

If lifelong learning is to be fully implemented, then this discrepancy between the two styles of learning needs to be addressed. Mature women have a lot to offer, and have been led to expect their contributions to be valued, which they are up to a point in their seminars as was seen in Francesca's case where the students wanted to work with her when they recognised her originality and confidence in presentations. But to learn one needs to have others willing to discuss ideas with, and if the younger students are not also encouraged to contribute, then the approach of the mature women will be devalued. As discussed in chapter 5, Francesca soon realised that the younger students tended to concentrate on written coursework and examinations which carried the most weight in assessment, and in order to gain a good degree pass, she decided to do this, too. Thus she had colluded with the prevalent patriarchal system in order to fit into the practices that gave the most rewards.

This assessment can also be seen as gendered. The skills and employability agenda has increased different types of activities, such as student-led seminars, but the weighting is still on examinations. Most higher education curricula are still centred on lectures, seminars and examinations, the 'natural' way of learning in higher education, which is rarely challenged. Traditional forms of writing often favour the masculine type of writing – bold and assertive. Despite the increasing diversity of those now entering higher education, the discourse still favours white, male and middle class applicants, and in order to succeed, women have to take on

the traits that they have not been socialised to develop. When women do well, for example, with the introduction of coursework that some research has shown better suits their style than examinations, there is public outcry that boys are lagging behind and something needs to be done. The curriculum is accused of being 'feminised' and therefore, standards must be slipping. Challenges to masculine identity and a deterioration of academic standards in the public discourse start at primary level schooling. Headlines such as 'Stop feminising our schools, the boys are suffering', suggest that:

> *The problems start in the classroom. Instead of the make-or-break sprint to the exam deadline, boys have to endure stultifying coursework* (Daily Mail, 2007).

The girls then are the 'other' once more, with the emphasis not on how well girls do, but seen as a problem when they are doing better than the boys.

Mann (cited Leathwood & Read, 2009) argued that fewer women getting first class degrees at Cambridge was due to the examination system favouring, 'aggression, singularity and the ability to maintain a coherent, if dogmatic, argument' (Mann, 2003, p 67). However, the work of Woodfield *et al* (2005) showed that there was no particular preference by gender for coursework over examinations, although more women got firsts in coursework than men. Perhaps the idea that women prefer coursework is another internalised 'truth' that is not actually the case. This particular study included mature students, but the authors did not differentiate between young and old in their reporting. They also found

that students of both genders reported that women work harder than men. In the case of Francesca, as reported in chapter 5, she worked very hard to master something she found difficult, admitting that it was to the detriment of other topics, but she did not want it to defeat her. The mature students in my study may fear examinations because of their negative experiences of them at school.

However, the majority of marks given are still for written assessments, rather than seminar performance, which the women on my study have been encouraged to develop, as a critical engagement with their material. This also suggests that the surface learning as often required for examinations is given more weight than the deep learning that comes from discussion (Freire, 1972; Haggis, 2003).

6.1.3.3: Implications for practice

Whilst it may be argued that access courses encourage the women to value their life experience and engage in a more discursive learning environment, and then hold out false hopes for them when they get to university, institutes of higher education can learn from this type of education. Relating experience and mixing the personal with the political can produce programmes suitable for all students, not just mature women, although these women may take the lead initially in seminars if they have practical experience of this type of learning. Staff development would need to take account of this style of learning and teaching, and tutors would need to be able to engage all learners and value their contributions equally. Thus access courses can be seen as positive models for change in higher education. This could

lead to mature women no longer being considered as 'other' by fitting into the man's world, but allowing them to have equal say as to what constitutes valid knowledge. This may all entail developing multiple and more complex methods of assessment, rewarding skills that have been developed elsewhere, but assessed in the context of the degree. If institutes of higher education are to work more with the employment sector, then the skills employers say they want need to be fostered and encouraged and given due weight in assessment.

6.1.4: Finding four:

a) In employment situations, some of the women were not willing to articulate the skills they had previously developed in the home, but used examples of skills from their degree courses because they thought they would be taken more seriously by employers.

b) Most of the women in my study, despite wishing to pursue other areas of interest, have taken employment in the educational sector.

Once again, the finding is divided into two sub-sections which are discussed separately.

6.1.4.1: Finding four a)

As discussed in chapter 3, the needs of industry are increasingly being catered for in higher education. A degree is seen as an important route to a fulfilling and lucrative career or employment, and this is stressed in the government

drive to get more people into higher education (see in particular the Dearing Report on Higher Education, NCIHE, 1997). This is especially important to the participants in my study, some of whom did not initially intend moving on to higher education when they approached their local further education college looking for a course to bring their skills up to date, or for interest now they had more time to themselves. This section will now discuss finding 4 a):

a) In employment situations, some of the women were not willing to articulate the skills they had previously developed in the home, but used examples of skills from their degree courses because they thought they would be taken more seriously by employers.

This research began when there was much interest in key skills, which were seen in chapter 3 as one of the answers to what employers stated they wanted from employers (studies on employers' dissatisfaction with graduates include Tolley, 1991; Otter, 1992; Kemp & Seagrave, 1995; for employers' perception of key skills, see Dench, *et al*, 1998). Although key skills began as part of vocational education, we have seen how it became linked to academia in the project the participants of my study were taking part, *Embedding Key Skills within a Traditional University* (2000).

As part of the emphasis on developing employability in graduates, all courses in higher education are now expected to produce intended 'outcomes', both subject specific and generic. This has implications for the curriculum, so the skills to be developed will be linked to the course, and will more easily be identified through work completed at university.

Skills developed prior to taking the course are valued in what they can add to the development of skills rather than replace them. So the skills women bring with them of time management, for example, are valued for helping them manage their degree. In an employment situation, time management will be valued as such, for managing the degree, not for managing the home, or getting all the children ready for school on time.

The key skills agenda has also been used to make prominent the skills that were being developed through particular degree courses, as has already been discussed in chapter 4, showing how some of the skills were formalised into a qualification (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, 2009). These skills were those considered easiest to assess, and were often referred to as the 'hard' skills. These were communication, application of number and information technology. They could be taught and certificated by the submission of a portfolio of evidence and an end test. There was an expectation that students would arrive at university well versed in key skills and the expectation that they could further certificate their key skills at a higher level. This could disadvantage the participants of my study as they were likely to have had no experience of this qualification.

However, the other three skills that were formalised but not certificated by an end test and not given UCAS points, were the softer skills often demonstrated by the women in my study, and were part of their understanding of the skills they perceived they were bringing to university. These were working with others (negotiating with children's schools, voluntary work, playground duties, team work in employment

etc); problem solving (balancing a home and family; balancing budgets, employment situations requiring training and managing staff etc.) and improving one's own learning and performance (helping children with homework; promotion at work, access courses etc.).

The women were well aware of these skills, and had been encouraged on their access courses to value these skills, yet some did not feel able to use the examples above to promote these skills to employers, even though they knew they were valuable skills, and the skills employers stated they were looking for. The example of Francesca was given in chapter 5, of not wanting to expose herself as a single mother of two small children as she thought it would prejudice her application. She perceived potential employers as male, and knew that her skills developed in the domestic sphere were not those valued by the society.

It appears that taking part in the key skills initiatives whilst in higher education has not impacted directly on the women's perceptions of their skills development. This could be for a number of reasons; that the key skills were so embedded that they did not have an awareness of them; that they expected to learn and develop particular skills as part of their course anyway; or that they were irrelevant to them. Considering the amount of time and money that has been invested in this and other similar initiatives, as discussed in chapter 3, there does not seem to have been any particular focus on the 'non-traditional' students and their skills, which include mature women.

6.1.4.2: Implications for practice

This is the most important finding from my study, as it shows the changes over time of the women's perceptions of their skills. They have come into higher education with a number of skills that they have already developed, and have been encouraged to value these. The skills are also the ones that employers say they want in graduates. Whilst at university, some of the women realise that their skills and experience do not fit into the discourse of higher education, and therefore begin to realise that these skills that they possess, which are crucial to their lives and identities, are not the ones that they will outwardly promote. Instead of adding to and creating new knowledge with their skills and experience, the women have realised that they have to revert to promoting the same skills but illustrate their job applications with examples of these skills as developed from their studies in higher education. By giving value to these skills and denying the value of their own skills as mature women, they are perpetuating the discourse. As Foucault claims, it is more difficult to resist a discourse that is insidious and invisible, a regime of truth, and easier to accept the way things are if one wants to succeed in this particular society (Foucault, 1980). Until women are encouraged to feel valued as women and as individuals with a myriad of skills developed in the home, and as mature people with experience of life, there will be no way forward for a society to have equality.

6.1.4.3: Finding four b)

b) Most of the women in my study, despite wishing to pursue other areas of interest, have taken employment in the educational sector.

The employment destinations of the women who I was still able to contact after they had finished their courses were shown as Table 5.1 in chapter 5. Ruth and Judy, who followed a PGCE course, were in full time secondary school teaching. Sarah, whose story is discussed in chapter 5, works four days a week in secondary teaching, and Jenny, who also took a PGCE in MFL now has two children and teaches one evening a week on *La Jolie Ronde*, a French language course for young children. Perhaps it is not surprising that these women work in the educational or private sector as teachers as that was the aim of three of them before taking the teaching course, and their reasons for this were analysed in chapter 5.

However, the other participants who I was able to contact, by their own admission, seem to have drifted into the educational sector. The discussion in chapter 2 showed how many women choose to work in education because it was thought to be appropriate to women's caring nature (Deem, 1978; Hopper & Osborne, 1975). However, for some of the women in my study, it has been by default. Rebecca was never particularly ambitious, but just wanted to complete her degree to see if she were able. She is now teaching part time in the further education college where she completed her access course. This may show that the relationship that is built up between staff and students over access courses was

strong so that this was seen as a natural step for her to return to the college where she knew she was valued.

Francesca, whose story has been told in chapter 5, had set her heart on continuing her studies to Master's level in Drama. This was what had made her change her approach to learning and become more strategic so that she received an upper second classification for her degree so that she could pursue her dream. Unfortunately, although she did attain her upper second, with two children to support, she was financially unable to take up the offer, and so took on some part time drama teaching at a further education college in the city. She was then able to apply for a full time lectureship at a sixth form college in the city, and has been able to promote her love of drama through teaching.

For other women, their dreams have not been realised either. Carmen had followed her interest in social policy and gained a good degree, but was unable to gain employment in her chosen field of social housing. As discussed in chapter 5, she felt there was not enough help for mature people getting back into work:

> *There is still prejudice against women. I've applied for many jobs and not had a reply. I applied to about twenty different companies, and had my CV checked by the careers people. Employers don't realise what skills you've got, there's a lot of frustration there about that* (Carmen: 4).

Although she claimed to feel positive about her degree, she is now thinking of applying to be a teaching assistant as she

does not have the confidence to do teaching, which was her ambition before taking the access course. There may be a number of other reasons why Carmen was unable to even get an interview for a job she felt fully qualified to do, but her own perception was that of her age, and being female. This has also had an effect on her self-esteem in that she does not feel able to follow her initial career choice of teaching, but is considering the role of teaching assistant.

Although conclusions cannot be drawn from this example, Carmen did value her domestic skills and was confident about using them as examples in her job applications, depending on whether she thought they were relevant to the position she was seeking. It is difficult to judge whether this might have had an effect on the reception of her applications by potential employers.

For the three women who took part-time work in education, it was on the hourly paid and relatively low-paid end of the sector. Whilst Pascall & Cox (1993) contested the view that education reproduces the social roles, and that education for mature women destabalises traditional notions of femininity, this research does not support that view for these three women. The women in my study have had to settle for these jobs because their circumstances meant they were not able to follow their chosen career routes.

This research has led me to believe that the social stereotypes of men as breadwinners and women as carers who choose to work part-time in 'natural' jobs for women still hold for some of these women, and this discourse may have been internalised by them. Education, particularly teaching,

is still dominated by women at the lower ends of the hierarchy and men at the top. These women appear to have been given negative choices, to work in part-time low paid employment or not at all. The final report of the Women and Work Commission, issued in July 2009, reveals that 41% of women compared to 12 % of men work part-time thus women make up three quarters of part-time workers. The pay gap between men and women for part-time work is 39.9% (Prosser, 2009). Considering the 'soft' skills that women generally possess and have developed through the domestic sphere, and the fact that these skills are what employers say they want, then these 'soft' skills seem to be working against them in that they can only find work in the field of education, despite having completed a degree in higher education in either English or Social Policy.

6.1.4.4: Implications for practice

An area that needs further research is why the skills that employers seek do not seem to match up with the experience of some of the women in this study. It leads me to believe that there is a different discourse for older women, and until this is investigated more thoroughly, there will still be qualified and able women who have made sacrifices to study in higher education, but still remain either unemployed or are in low level, part-time poorly-paid and typically female occupations. Some of the participants in this study realised that in order to gain employment, they had to 'play the game' and internalise the discourse of what is a valid example of a skill and what is not. Perhaps this insight was gained from being in the workplace before taking on the course in higher education, part of 'being mature'.

There now follow two sections that concentrate less on the experience of those participants who took access courses. Firstly, a section on the participants who followed the PGCE course, looking at similarities and differences in their approach to skills with the women discussed above. There then follows a section on those who did not complete either their course of higher education or the research study. There are important implications of retention in this section.

6.2: The graduates

Throughout this study, it had been apparent that the women who chose to undertake the PGCE courses had a different approach to the women who undertook undergraduate study. Some of the reasons have already been explored, such as their self-esteem being generally higher as they have already experienced higher education, so their expectations are more informed. 'You're a graduate, so you know you can do it' (Sarah 1).

Due to the nature of their courses being vocational, they tended to have a more instrumental approach, knowing what they hoped to do at the end of the course, and whilst it was certainly self-fulfilment for all four of them, it was not the only reason they were taking the course. One had always wanted to teach; one already had a TEFL qualification, but the other two had taken different directions as younger people, and so this was very much a cross-over of self-fulfilment and a new direction, with the decision to teach often reached by taking ethical and moral decisions.

Key skills was very much apparent in the PGCE course, both because of the development project and also the fact that the students would have to pass the Training and Development Agency key skills tests in numeracy, literacy and information and communications technology (ICT) in order to obtain their Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). They might also be asked to teach key skills once they were in post in schools or colleges. However, Sarah commented that she felt the key skills work got in the way and was impatient to get on and learn how to teach: she assumed she had got the key skills and if she had not, someone would tell her. Ruth also felt her key skills were developed and rather than think about how to develop them, she wanted to think how she could use them to be an effective teacher, seeing them more as tools rather than an end in themselves. The two PGCE MFL students both saw their weakness was in application of number but neither gave it any importance as they could not see how they would need it in their teaching. All were most concerned over ICT as they knew they would have to produce an assignment based around this during their course. Overall, then, the PGCE students felt happy with their skills, and saw them as part of becoming a teacher. As one stated, 'if you can't communicate, you shouldn't be a teacher' (Sarah:2).

However, some of the practical considerations were similar to those of the undergraduate women. Judy struggled to manage her family around her studies, and complained about the lack of facilities at Central University. Ruth had struggled to get organised because of the lack of support and information from the university prior to starting her course. So this is also reflected in the first finding cited earlier in this chapter, about the need for a designated person in each

institution of higher education to co-ordinate the needs of mature women. Of course, all mature students need support, but from my experience of the participants of this study, they were still responsible for organising childcare and this caused the most difficulty for the mature women in accessing the information they needed.

6.3: Those who left the study

This section will discuss those who left the study, and the reasons why they were not able to continue. Of the thirteen main participants in my study, one did not begin her studies (Elizabeth); one deferred for a year then did not complete her degree (Anya), one left after a few weeks (Sasha), one left after the first year (Susanne) and Yasmin did not remain a participant in my research, but did complete her degree. The reasons given by the women who did not complete will be explored and linked with the theoretical literature. The literature on retention and non-completion has been discussed in chapter 2, and refers to the work of McGivney, (1996, 2004) and Hagedorn, (1999), for example.

The exception to those who did not complete is Yasmin, the youngest of the participants in my study, and the only undergraduate student who did not use access as her entry qualification. Yasmin's story is related in chapter 5, where she discussed whether being mature was a good or bad thing. She very much wanted to be accepted by the younger students and did not want to appear as 'mature'. She was pleased when some other women expressed surprise when they realised how old she was, assuming she was the same age as they were. Her identity was quite fragile when she

began her studies. She did not want to appear frivolous from having been a model, but also wanted to have the full university experience as a young person. Her feelings of missing out because she had left school at 15 were mixed as she felt more mature than the other students, but still wanted to be part of the experience rather than be seen as different because of her age. Within a short time of starting her degree, she had moved away from her parents' home into a flat, and had given up her boyfriend, and was making a new start. This had a knock on effect of taking part in my study, as she had now shed the identity of being mature. She did not ever actually refuse to take part further, but was not returning my calls or messages and always apologised and made another appointment until I realised she did not wish to continue but did not want to admit it to me. I was rather disappointed not to be able to continue interviewing Yasmin, but understood her reasons for not wishing to continue as her identity was no longer perceived as mature, and she did not wish to be associated with a study on mature women.

Family pressures caused two of the participants to leave. Elizabeth did not start her course because her sister became ill and she had to look after her. Anya's oppressions were multiple, and she gave up during her third year. Both women were unable to continue because of significant others. Elizabeth felt very guilty and continued to apologise when speaking to me, both for not continuing with the study, and for letting others down. She had been socialised by her upbringing and schooling to be the caring one in the family, that putting herself before others was selfish, and the strain had been too much for her.

Anya had seven children and her husband had agreed to look after the children while she was at university. She related that he went straight to the pub when she got home, leaving her to deal with the children, three of whom were still at school. He suffered from depression and twice tried to commit suicide, ran up alcohol debts and eventually left her. She was sitting up all night trying to complete her essays and reading, and was eventually told by her doctor that she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and her children might have to be taken into care, so she left with no qualification to show for it.

For both of these women, they internalised this as their own failure to cope with all the demands of their families, yet it was not the women who failed, but the educational and social policies and lack of social support that made it impossible for these women to attain their full potential. There are still barriers that exist preventing older women with domestic responsibilities from full access to the opportunities of higher education, as women still undertake the vast majority of unpaid domestic work and caring in addition to any other commitments they may wish to pursue for themselves. As McGivney (1999) notes, these women also incur a 'status penalty' since society does not recognise or value this caring work, nor understand the complexity of how they manage their lives. Additional penalties of withdrawing from the labour market or education, and the financial penalties of not working compound the ambivalence of their role in society. As women, the dilemma is whether they should put their families first, as no one else will do it for them, and they receive no financial rewards for doing so? Or should they try and seek personal fulfilment in education or employment? For most,

there is no real choice. These reasons somewhat reflect Susanne's reasons for leaving the university, too, along with the reasons given in the discussion of her case above.

Finally, Sasha left after two weeks into her course. She had hoped Elizabeth and she would study together as they had both taken the access course which allowed them to join straight into the second year of the undergraduate course. Sasha found that the other students were already in friendship groups, and group work made her feel marginalised, as she perceived the others would not want to work with her because of her age, and not knowing her. The first two weeks that she tried she felt lonely, with no one to share things with, and secondly no one to work with as she and Elizabeth had planned how they were going to approach their studies together. Whilst the access course prepared the women academically for university by including the first year of the undergraduate course, it made it more difficult for them to fit in. Access courses, as already discussed, do foster a sense of belonging and sharing, helping boost self-confidence, and when that support was taken away, there was nothing left for this student, and she withdrew. Mature women usually attend an institution near their homes, where they have family support, but this makes it more difficult to make friendships when younger students live together on or near the campus, thus do not have the social interaction with the student community. This can compound the isolation felt within the academic arena.

6.3.1: Implications for practice

Mature women who do not complete their courses do so for a variety of reasons, as shown above. For some, it was a lost dream, and was linked to feelings of guilt, of letting others down. The reasons given above were straightforward, but may have been more complex than those given. This could relate to West's work (1996) on reasons for women returning to learning, where he suggests that the initial reasons given may be those that are outwardly acceptable, but on further investigation become more complex. This a very emotional area for research, but if possible, those women who did not complete their courses could be investigated more fully, and this might inform practice and enable support systems to be available to help other women in similar situations. Practical structures such as following up non-attendance promptly could help alleviate the sense of isolation. For example, where letters or emails are automatically sent out, they could perhaps be accompanied by a telephone call. Mature women have been used to having tutors on access courses who are very supportive, and many develop a strong personal relationship with them. Perhaps a mentoring system could be set up for the women, either staffed by a dedicated member of the academic staff or another mature student at the university. The strong bond that Sasha and Elizabeth had kept them going until the bond was snapped and both students withdrew.

6.4: Summary of discussion of findings

As a longitudinal study of a limited number of mature women returning to learning through higher education, there have

been a number of issues that reflect the literature such as lack of practical support from institutions of higher education, and the importance of the role of significant others. The focus of this study has been to investigate the experience of these women, particularly regarding their skills, and if this changed over time. The women had been encouraged to value their skills of being mature and the life experience that went with this, but most found that these skills and experiences were not valued in higher education. They soon realised that the more masculine skills were the ones that were valued, particularly those that were examined and were credit-bearing. So, in an employment situation, they used the skills they had developed through their studies as examples of their skills rather than those they had valued as being developed elsewhere in the domestic sphere and employment prior to their studies. Most of the women felt a huge sense of achievement at having gained their qualification, but had to adapt their learning style to that of the university, which some felt was a retrograde step.

Those women who I was able to keep in touch with have all taken jobs in the educational sector, particularly the undergraduates who took part-time, low-paid work.
There now follows a section reflecting on the research methods used in the study, particularly semi-structured interviews. This is a personal response as I felt that the research did not go 'by the book' and it has implications for future research of this kind.

6.5: Reflections on interviewing

The process of interviewing raised a number of issues for me, and so I reflect below on how the method was not always as straightforward as expected. I have discussed at length in chapter 4 the theoretical and ethical considerations behind interviewing and the power relations that exist between the interviewer and interviewee. However, I was unable to find research on how respondents feel about being interviewed, therefore I designed a brief questionnaire and gave the participants in my study the option to either respond in writing or be interviewed face to face (Appendix V). This took place when the undergraduate women were in their third year, and the PGCE students were already working as teachers. As this had not been part of the original project that they consented to, I wanted to give them the choice of how they could respond. A table is shown below of how the participants responded:

Table 6.2: Questionnaire responses

Name	How interview was conducted
Rebecca and Carmen	Together in the university coffee bar
Judy	Telephone
Francesca	At my home
Wendy	Student services coffee bar
Jenny	Telephone
Sarah	At her home
Ruth	Returned completed questionnaire by post

My own reflections can be analysed in the following categories:

- Practical considerations
- Ethical considerations
- Power and vulnerability

6.5.0: Practical considerations

These considerations of interviewing have been discussed in detail in the literature on interviewing (see for example, Cohen & Manion, 1996; Kvale, 1996; Schostak, 2003; Bryman, 2008), but they have made me learn lessons about the practical nature of research and how it does not always go to plan. By giving the women control of the tape recorder, sometimes they switched it off and we both forgot to switch it back on. Another time I arrived and the participant had forgotten our appointment, but we bravely continued with five children and two dogs for company. Perhaps the most difficult was when two participants, Sasha and Elizabeth, wanted to be interviewed together. We agreed not to talk over each other, but they soon forgot this and it was difficult to transcribe.

As discussed in chapter 4, I aimed to use unstructured interviews to allow the participants the freedom to talk about their own experiences of returning to learning. I did not want to overly influence the research by my own experience, but could not divorce myself from it. In the initial interviews, I avoided talking about my own experience, and wanted to know whether the participants felt valued as respondents. The questionnaire contained a question on how they felt about their first interview, and there was a variety of responses, mostly positive, with some seeing it as an opportunity to talk about themselves:

> *I felt quite excited to be part of somebody's study. I felt quite important* (Sarah).

Judy had felt that taking part in the research had made her look at her life and put it into perspective in a positive way, yet also felt vulnerable when faced with questions about her past and had become emotional. Conducting research in depth and over a period of time is a very intense process and I was conscious of taking time from my participants, and was always very grateful for their participation. Yet, I was not the only one to benefit as Wendy found it empowering and said one of the reasons she took part in the research was:

> *I thought it might be of benefit to me – you would be a mature student who had the same fears. It would give me my first contact with a student at the university. You were a good point of contact, so relaxed and ordinary* (Wendy).

An important part of my methodology was transcribing each interview and giving a copy of their own interview to each participant. It surprised me that most did not really want to look at them too deeply, as I had planned to use the transcripts to reflect back with them and perhaps draw out themes for further discussion. For me, as a researcher, the exact wording and mode of speech, the pauses and musings emphasised the richness of thought and reflections, but some of the participants just thought it reflected their incoherence and lack of articulation, and were shocked to see what was written down. I assured then that this was a normal way of speaking, but some were not convinced, although they did want to keep the transcripts for a later date. Francesca said she would like to show them to her children or others if it

would help them, as they were a record of her journey through higher education:

> *I've actually seen myself change from a gibbering wreck to somebody who's started to get decidedly cocky at the end, well, I wouldn't say decidedly cocky, but certainly a lot more confident and you can actually see the process of fears as they've been alleviated as you've got further and further into the system… I think, I feel it could help somebody, yes, I would let them read them. Nothing to be ashamed of, is it?* (Francesca).

6.5.1: Ethical considerations

Relating to the method of using unstructured interviews discussed above, there are the ethical considerations of how one uses the data. Giving the women a transcript after each interview allowed them to comment, and to discuss the issues with them, but there were also the conversations off tape about confidential matters the participants did not want to be part of the interview. However, I cannot 'un-know' what they told me, so this must influence me. Working in the same university, I often came across the women and we would chat. I also realised that I had connections with the friends of two of the women and would sometimes meet them on social occasions where they would want to talk about the research. Another has become a friend through taking part in the research. It is impossible to keep all the separate strands from overlapping, but it could be argued as a positive because, the work of Marshall & Rossman (1999) and Flick (2003) in particular, stress the importance of working in the same context as the research takes place, as this helps to

understand the accepted norms of the institution and can help the researcher reveal important taken for granted assumptions about the role of women, for example.

Ethical guidelines are vital to all research, and I issued each participant with a copy of these. It was the issue of confidentiality as noted in my reflective diary that had prompted me to prepare the questionnaire as I realised that the participants were talking to each other and referring to them in the interviews:

> *What's going on here? How does Francesca know I interviewed Anya? Are they talking about me? Have I said something that connects the two?* (Research Journal).

It made me question whether I had broken confidentiality, but I was sure I had not; the women had identified other mature students in their school and asked if they were part of my study on mature women. I was similarly surprised at the trust they had in me, as the following responses to the question of whether the ethical guidelines had been followed:

> *I read them, and it went in and out and I haven't really considered them since. I trusted you* (Jenny).

> *I can't remember what they were but I'm quite sure they were followed. It was implicit that I trusted you; that's why I can't remember what they were* (Sarah).

You sent them and I did read them. I assumed you followed them. I didn't think I was selling anything to the papers. I knew it was just for your work (Wendy).

The latter comment from Wendy also shows that she was aware of what she was telling me, that she was in control of what information I was given, unlike others, who gave me information off tape that I could not use, but they felt it was an important part of themselves which they wanted me to know, but not publish.

My ethical guidelines also gave the purpose of the research, which was to 'examine a range of issues relevant to mature women who are returning to learning' (Appendix IV). I was trying to avoid a positivist approach, and did not refer to the particular interest of my study, which was their skills. Sarah, one of the PGCE students, thought this was misleading:

When I read the initial letter I thought it was just about women returners to education. It was a bit of a shock when you asked about the key skills lecture, I hadn't realised. It was an almost irrelevant part of it as far as I was concerned… perhaps you could have made things more clear about the key skills at the beginning. However, if you did, I would have been less clear about the rest of it. If it had been limited to the key skills, it would have been less of an interview (Sarah).

As already discussed in the findings, there were a number of issues that were important to the women and which were related to their skills, such as the value of their life experience, and their different approaches to learning that

may not necessarily have been discussed if I had told the participants that the focus was on key skills. The Key Skills Qualification, itself, generally has had a bad press and many fail to understand that the issue of skills is much wider than the eponymous qualification. If I had restricted my research to just key skills, the data would have been so much poorer. When the issue of skills and skills audits was mentioned, it usually elicited a negative response, as already discussed in the findings, so by leaving the research question open, I felt the rich data justified this approach. This approach also allowed for the blind spots and presuppositions of the interviewer by allowing the participant to speak of their reality, and expands knowledge creation rather than constricting it (Hawkesworth, 1989; Harding, 1987).

6.5.2: Power and vulnerability

Many writers have stressed the power that interviewers hold over the interviewee. Feminist research aims to equalise the power relationships, and I have tried to follow this blueprint, for example, Mies (1991) writes extensively on how feminist research must be empowering. The assumption here is that the interviewer has power over the interviewee, yet, at times, I felt vulnerable myself, for various reasons, and felt a sense of responsibility to put forward the experiences of the participants in as authentic a way as possible. One of the major principles of my research was to give voice to the women, and sometimes I felt I was not always able to do justice to their opinions because of the focus of this study. However, from an ethical point of view, I felt that they needed to be able to air their views that made them the

people who they were, and how they linked their life experience to their decision to return to learning.

Whilst attempting to be part of the research, as I have a lot in common with many of the participants in the research, I also did not want to be the expert or devalue any comments that were not in my own experience. As Oakley (1991) points out, one cannot refuse to answer questions about one's own experience, but I tried to avoid giving advice. Wendy asked my advice about a particular course in the school where I teach, and I told her I could not really say which made me feel uncomfortable. However, in the interview regarding the questionnaire, Wendy commented:

> *I took positive action after talking about my negative problems. Communication is important. It helped to clarify what I wanted to do and when I wanted to do it. I asked you what I should do about a particular course and you said you couldn't tell me so I had to go and do it myself!* (Wendy).

So my perceived vulnerability was perceived as empowering by Wendy.

For me, the power did shift during the interviews, particularly as the interviews were longitudinal and we were able to get to know each other more. My role changed from 'knowledgeable stranger' to 'friend' over time, too with some of the women. Although Skeggs (1994) and Maynard (1994) discuss the different power relations between the interviewer and interviewee in terms of class, race and age, for example, they do not discuss the shifts that occur back and forth during an

interview. This shifting made me question what was my position in the research, and how I reacted to what people told me, especially when I may not have agreed with what they said, or was shocked at disclosures. Susanne said one of the best parts of being in the study was that she could rant for an hour and 'somebody would sit and listen and nod and not argue with me'. When we laughed and I said that I could have done, she said that she knew I could, so it was implicitly acknowledged that it was her agenda and her platform and she found it liberating. Women are socialised into not speaking about themselves, and Susanne took advantage of the interview situation to do so. Skegg's analysis of her longitudinal research (1994) supports this view, she writes that she spent a lot of her time counselling and listening to problems, but felt it was all part of the commitment to feminist research.

I have learned things about myself as a person, and not just as an interviewer through this study. Wendy had a very maternal attitude towards the younger students and was proud of being a mother figure because of her own children. This made me rethink my attitude towards the undergraduates that I teach, and not to consider them as just there for the social life. Ruth was very precise about what she told me and sometimes I felt she was impatient with me. This made me try to be more efficient. I have come to realise that throughout life, we respond to people differently, and this reflects the many different facets we have to our personality and identity. I know I would give offence to some of the respondents if I gave my views on particular topics, but the need for sensitivity does not take away from the authenticity of the researcher's response. As Millen (1997)

points out, it can lead to conflicts of representation by the researcher, but I would argue that there can be no fixed truth of any situation, and the participants of the study know that I would interpret their views in an empathetic way, what Rafferty (2004) refers to as the 'deal' between the researcher and researched. This is somewhat reflected in Susanne's comment above.

Having discussed at length in chapter 4 the importance of women interviewing women, particularly the groundbreaking work of Oakley (1981) and Finch (1984) who were among the first to question the role of the researcher when dealing with issues particularly relevant to women, I wanted to know if this made a difference to the women I interviewed. When asked, most of the respondents said that it did not make any difference whether it was a female or male, which surprised me. Francesca was clear that it was the person, not the gender that was important:

> *I'm not intimidated by men, personally, but I think it depends on the woman and it depends on the man, there are different types of people that you feel comfortable with, anyway, I think it was about the type of person you are, I don't like to be gender-led* (Francesca).

Carmen was the only one who did feel it made a difference, she did not think it would have been easy talking to a young man, as 'there is more of a trust thing between women'. Padfield and Proctor's work (1996) illustrates this and, although I have no comparison to make between male and female interviewers in this research, I did feel there were

many confidences exchanged, particularly after the tape recorded interview was over, which may not have been given if I were male. There were many allusions to a shared experience, both of being a woman, and a shared educational background, and this is supported in the work of Stanley & Wise (1993) and Harding (1997) for example.

6.5.3: Summary of interviewing

This section has been a personal reflection of the method of semi-structured interviewing, based upon the questionnaire given to the participants. It called into question some of the accepted views on interviewing, particularly the issues of power between the interviewer and interviewee. The women in my study placed a lot of trust in me, and seemed happy to speak openly about their experiences at university. Because this was a longitudinal study, trust was developed and later interviews were more relaxed and became more focused on their specific experiences at university than the earlier life history interviews. Some surprises of interviewing were discussed and related to the literature reviewed in chapter 4.

6.6: Critique of typology

In chapter 5, the typology of Harris & Brooks (1998) was used to analyse the data. Whilst this was very useful in categorising the themes into institutional, situational and dispositional constraints, it did become rather restricting when attempting to categorise some issues that covered two or three of the constraints. There have been other researchers who have used these categories, but mostly when investigating them as barriers to distance education (see for

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example, Sundet & Galbraith, 1991; Garland, 1993, Morgan & Tam, 1999).

Harris & Brooks' research was intended to compare mature students with their younger counterparts in a university in order to ascertain whether mature students had particular needs that could be addressed by the institution in question. My research was of a less direct practical nature, and sought to understand how my participants experienced higher education, and therefore the bulk of my analysis fits under the dispositional section. I have illustrated Harris & Brooks' typology in chapter 5 (table 5.1) and now present on the following page how I have adjusted the table to fit my needs. I show in bold text where I have added categories from my own analysis.

Table 6.2: Harris & Brooks' typology re-worked

	Examples
Institutional Factors linked to the institution of higher education	• Inconvenient class times or location • Limited financial aid • Transport problems • Age-inappropriate **(and inadequate)** student services • Professors who treat adult students as adolescents and fail to value life experience **(analysed under dispositional factors)**
Situational Factors linked to one's current life situation	• Lack of spousal support **(expanded to 'significant others' to include parents and peers)** • Economic strains
Dispositional Factors linked to one's self perception	• Lack of self confidence **(analysed as self-esteem)** • Fear of change • Feeling of guilt at being a student • Lack of confidence in academic skills **(analysed as awareness of own skills before and during higher education)** • **Life experience not valued at university** • **Different ways of working to younger students** • **How skills are articulated in employment situations** • **Employment destinations**

This new typology is more useful for an inductive and interpretive study such as this one in which participants reveal the thick description which puts the social and cultural relationships into context, and allows more freedom of analysis. Nevertheless, the categories do help in highlighting the multiple oppressions that are experienced by some mature women in higher education.

6.7: Summary of the chapter

This chapter sought to discuss the findings of the research, and to place them within the theoretical framework which I have chosen. Some of the discussion reflected the literature, and this has added to the overall body of knowledge on mature women in higher education. Some of the findings were new, and these have been discussed in detail, providing implications for practice of these findings. There followed a section on the women who did not complete their studies, and suggested reasons for why this might have happened, again with implications for practice for future mature women students who may have similar reasons for withdrawal. Finally, I reflected upon the methodology by discussing responses from a questionnaire I designed on how the participants felt about being interviewed and also by critiquing Harris and Brooks' typology which I used for the analysis of my data, resulting in a new typology more relevant to my particular study of mature women students in higher education.

The final chapter looks to summarise my findings and discuss the strengths and limitations of the thesis, followed by a personal reflection on this research journey.

Chapter 7: Concluding remarks

7.0: Introduction

This chapter is the culmination of my empirical research study and in it I will draw together the discussion of my thesis and present conclusions and implications for practice in the light of recent changes in the skills agenda, and the wider concerns for mature women in the workplace. I will also comment on suggestions for further research, look at the strengths and limitations of the thesis and then present a brief reflection on my personal journey through this research project. Before proceeding, I will summarise the findings of the research, and draw out the key messages.

7.0: Summary of Research Findings

Whilst support for mature women students is increasing in some universities, Central University does not have enough in place to support and encourage their studies. 'Learner identity' was a key aspect of how the women saw themselves and much of this related to significant others. For some, the type of education they received did not live up to their expectations and were also disappointed that tutors did not value their life experience. Some of the respondents were not willing to use the valuable skills developed in the domestic sphere as evidence of skills in an employment situation as they recognised that the dominant discourse did not value them. Finally, those who could be traced were all working within the educational sector.

7.1: Value of the research

I will keep this succinct as the research questions have been presented in detail in earlier chapters, but I will draw out the value of this research.

This study has added to the discussion of the multiple forms of oppression as experienced by women in higher education, by using the typology of institutional, situational and dispositional factors. The findings will also add to the wider concerns of society, as the oppression of women cannot be seen in isolation. These forms of oppression have been exposed by taking a feminist approach, framed within a feminist epistemology which takes gender as a social construct. It takes the position that knowledge is socially organised. A range of theories has complemented this, mainly through applying issues of power as demonstrated by Foucault to understand how power is maintained, internalised and sometimes resisted, and by Freire, whose work on oppression has been used to illustrate how the multiple oppressions that women experience, and a way that could possibly change pedagogy for freedom from oppression.
The value of this thesis is that it has shown that knowledge is still institutionalised, and that the feminist challenge on what constitutes new knowledge has not penetrated the prevalent discourse. Some of the women in my study have attempted to challenge this discourse, but were unable to, and some left university altogether or decided that in order to succeed, they needed to internalise this discourse, rather than resist it.

This research has also shown that after gaining their qualifications in university, the labour market appears to be a

barrier to those with aspirations for meaningful employment. One might suggest that their unemployment or part-time status is due to the recession or the neo-liberal economies since the 1970s, but one also needs to take into consideration the fact that younger students with the same qualifications have found employment.

7.2: Update on Skills Agenda

The context in which this research is set was a time of great interest and development of key skills based on the perceived need for a flexible, skilled workforce for a modern competitive economy. At the time, there were numerous research projects, and developmental work on key skills across schools, colleges and workplaces, and many conferences and meetings taking place as to how best to integrate key skills into qualifications, including the one in which this research is situated. Whilst the need for a more flexible and skilled workforce is still high on the public agenda, there has been a change in attitudes towards key skills and the focus has moved away from key skills as such, for a variety of reasons, including the unpopularity of the qualification in schools and colleges and the differing attitudes in higher education as to whether it was the role of universities to teach these skills. The political focus changed to adult basic literacy and thus took the spotlight from higher education and key skills, but the issue of skills is still very important and other ways of developing employability skills are now taking place which seem less prescriptive. The Key Skills qualification will be phased out by 2010 and replaced by functional skills.

The implications for mature women students wishing to enter higher education in the future are apparent in the Leitch review of skills 'Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills' (2006). In this report, Leitch calls for 40% of the workforce to have degrees by 2020, yet 70% of the 2020 workforce had already left school at the time of the report, so there will be a need to get more mature students back to higher education, but mainly on a part time basis and funded by employers or self-funded. With the introduction of tuition fees and the possible increase in these fees in Russell Group universities, it may exclude the type of candidate for higher education that has featured in this thesis for financial reasons.

7.3: Suggestions for further research

For further research, I would like to revisit the women and discuss their experience of higher education at a time perhaps five years after they complete their studies, and see if their views had changed, and to see what employment options they have been able to access.

I would also like to investigate the experience of those who did not complete their studies, such as Elizabeth and Susanne, at a later date when they would be hopefully feeling less vulnerable than when I spoke to them last. This could help to understand why they felt unable to carry on, and perhaps help the institution in future situations of this kind. Another avenue that opened up during the research was the influence of significant others, particularly peers. Much of this was reported as negative, and links very closely with the 'self-policing' ideas for Foucault, which interests me, but I was

unable to expand it as part of this thesis. As I received negative comments myself about my attempt to access higher education, it would encompass my own experience and make an interesting study.

For a larger study, a combined quantitative and qualitative approach could be taken, surveying mature women in higher education in a number of universities about their aspirations and skills, and a smaller number interviewed about their experience more fully. This would add to the body of research on mature women across a wider area. Although I accept that mature men may also face some of the problems outlined in my study on gaining employment, I feel feminist research solely on women is valid and can only add to other perspectives on skills and employment.

7.4: Strengths and limitations

As a PhD, there was only a single researcher, so there could be no inter-researcher reliability checks. However, as it was a personal study reflecting my own experience, it was necessarily subjective. I was able to study deeply the few women's experience in my study and to reflect on the research with them, which gives the study its reliability. However, another researcher may not necessarily arrive at the same conclusions as I. The research has used a range of research tools, not just the semi-structured interviews, which have been at the heart of the thesis. I have had access to the research project, *Embedding Key Skills in a Traditional University* from its inception, attending project meetings and interviewing staff. I was also able to attend some of the lectures and meetings with students in the schools. I have

used field notes as a reflective tool for myself, and the participants in the study were also given notebooks to record their feelings.

The longitudinal nature of the study allowed me to build relationships with the women participants, and having had a similar experience to them as a mature returner, there was often a shared empathy, even if the experiences and reasons for returning to learning were different to my own. As discussed in the thesis, women interviewing women can create a strong bond of shared understanding of being a woman, and many of the women opened up to me about their thoughts concerning university as our relationship built up. Working in the same university allowed me to be an insider as it allowed me to understand the particular context in which the women were studying. Having access to the meetings of the key skills project and being able to talk to the project leaders about their approach to key skills also gave me an insight into what the women would be experiencing in their schools.

If I had known this research process would be so lengthy, I would have kept in touch with the women and asked them to continue with my study for longer. When I did try to contact them all, some had moved and not given forwarding addresses, although those I did contact were more than willing to be interviewed further about their employment situation. This gave me some feelings of frustration, but also shows how inductive the research has been which has allowed me to follow the themes that emerged from the data that were not envisaged at the beginning of the thesis, and which have become the most interesting of the findings.

7.5: Personal reflections

This study has grown from my own experience of, and interest in women students entering higher education at a more mature stage in their lives, after having a period out of formal education.

The journey of my thesis has never been smooth, and illness, marriage breakup and the need to be the sole breadwinner for three young children whilst being a student has put enormous pressure on me. However, that has also allowed me to try and understand the sacrifices and difficulties that the women in my study went through, and for that I am grateful to them, and the opportunity to continue my research to the end. The quest to finish this thesis has been worth it, and I have enjoyed the many other jobs I undertook whilst studying. The teaching has extended my interest in higher education, and has helped me to see both sides of higher education, as a tutor and student, yet I am in a similar position to the women discussed in the previous chapter, of working in part-time, short contractual work in education. The work I have undertaken regarding key skills and other skills initiatives has given me a deeper insight into government policy and through the development and evaluation work I have been able to speak to practitioners and students in schools, colleges and universities about their thoughts and experiences, which has added value to my research work.

The search for answers to my research questions has led me on an academic journey which has been a valuable and most

rewarding learning experience. With this thesis now behind me, I hope to be able to use my expertise to support others in similar circumstances and to fulfil my potential.

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Appendix I:

School of English Studies Student Self-Report Form

Appendix II:
The University of Nottingham Key Skills Profile Student Self Assessment Form

Appendix III:
The University of Nottingham English Studies Student Self Assessment Form

Appendix IV:
Ethical Guidelines

Appendix V:
'How have you felt about being interviewed?' questionnaire