Aspirations, Austerity and Agency: Adult Women Learners in the English FE Sector and The Capacity to Aspire in an Austerity Context

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham

for the degree of

Doctor of philosophy

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Declaration

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Abstract

The Kennedy review (1997) prompted a dramatic rise in the number of adult women learners in Further Education (FE), which at its peak reached almost 3 million. However, a narrowing of policy goals and austerity cuts over the past fifteen years have seen this figure plummet by more than half. In the context of productivity and austerity, women learners who do not immediately progress into employment are deemed a poor return on investment. And yet, it is somewhat surprising that given the sharp cuts to the sector, as well as their gradual erasure from policy discourse and research, adult women continue to represent the majority of all learners in FE. Against this harsh backdrop, it is important to understand why women return to FE and VET and what they hope to gain from doing so.

Located within a feminist inquiry, this longitudinal study aims to understand the aspirations of women learners, how they are shaped by past experiences and the ways that they navigate towards their goals. The in-depth narrative interviews with twenty-one women learners on a range of VET programmes, provides a rich understanding of the complex nature of aspirations and how these are shaped by their biographies. The complex and dynamic nature of women learners' aspirations have been conceptualised using Arjun Appadurai's '*capacity to aspire'* (2004) and Debraj Ray's '*aspirations window' (2006)*, along with feminist economics theories on the gendered constraints on choice and agency.

The findings illustrate that women learners often return to FE in response to a personal crisis whereby for a variety of reasons, education is central to their hope of making a 'fresh start' and rebuilding their lives. As women learners progress towards their aspirations, it becomes evident that they are not only complex, dynamic and socially situated, but are also powerfully shaped by agency and the everyday structural

constraints that they must navigate in order to participate such as care, work, lack of financial resources, gender norms and competing preferences. The heterogeneous and diverse sample revealed that while women experience similar gendered constraints, those who are BME, lone parents, and/or migrants, experience them more acutely. At the same time, all the women in this study achieve broader gains beyond their original aspirations such as confidence, a greater sense of agency and well-being. This is important as it seems to have the most positive impacts on those who start the course with difficult biographies and challenging lives.

This study not only contributes a much-needed contemporary perspective on women learners' experiences in the FE sector but offers crucial insights about the important role it plays in their hopes and aspirations of rebuilding their lives. The feminist economics lens brings into sharp relief how in the context of austerity, instrumental policy goals fail to take account of the complex intersectional disadvantages that women learners face in their everyday lives, and how they navigate the responsibilities of care and work so that they can pursue their own interests.

Keywords: FE, VET, Women Learners, Aspirations, Feminist Economics, Austerity

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I am indebted to the women learners who generously and bravely shared their stories. Without your willingness to participate, this research would not have been possible.

Through your stories, I have gained a deep understanding of the complex lives you lead, and the important part education plays in you being able to live flourishing lives.

I would like to express thanks to the senior leaders, lecturers and the support staff who welcomed me into their institutions and facilitated my research.

Doing a PhD when you have a young family requires sacrifices on all sides and I consider myself lucky that they have been cheering me on behind the scenes. I am forever grateful to you Will, Beth, and Ben, for allowing me the time, space and quiet to get on with my work. You have all been there to offer love, support, hugs and a few laughs when I have needed them, as well as coffee, wine, and food. It is always the little things that make the big things happen! Without your practical and emotional support Will, the PhD would not have been possible. The PhD process and listening to other mothers' stories has taught me that we share the core values of being good role models for our children. I am so proud that you both love learning and debating as much as I do.

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Dedication

I dedicate my thesis to the women who gave me their time and shared their stories which were often painful, raw, and emotional – I feel honoured that you trusted me. I was struck by your bravery and determination in the face of multiple adversities to achieve the aspirations you had for your lives.

Finally, I dedicate this to my late father Patrick. You were a gentle and kind soul who encouraged me every day of your life. Because of you, I have always believed in the value and power of education to be transformative, no matter who you are or where you have come from.

Publications list

The following publications are based on this thesis:

Suart, R. (2015). 'Second chance learners': An exploratory study of the choices, constraints, values and aspirations of some adult women learners on courses in the Further Education sector. University of Nottingham: Masters' Thesis.

Suart, R. (2019). Gaining More Than Just Vocational Skills: Evaluating Women Learners' Aspirations Through the Capability Approach. In S. McGrath, M. Mulder, J. Papier, & R. Suart, Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work (pp.1-17). Cham: Springer.

McGrath, S; Powell, L; Alla-Mensah, J; Hilal, R; Suart, R: (2020). New VET Theories for New Times: The Critical Capabilities Approach to Vocational Education and Training and its Potential for Theorising a Transformed and Transformational VET, Journal of Vocational Education and Training

NB: Some of the participants in this thesis have been cited within the pilot study (Suart, 2015) and other publications (Suart, 2019; McGrath, Powell, Alla-Mensah, Hilal, Suart, 2020), as well as conference papers. Where this is the case, it has been annotated in the footnotes and is noted on the participant data table (appendix 8)

Abbreviations

AW	Aspirations Window
AEB	Adult Education Budget
AG	Aspirations Gap
ALL	Advanced Learning Loan
CTA	Capacity to Aspire
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
HE	Higher Education
HCDA	Human Capabilities and Development Approach
ILR	Individual Learner Record
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
ONS	Office for National Statistics
SFA	Skills Funding Agency
SoA	Sense of Agency
SoC	Structures of constraint
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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Foreword

Almost twenty-five years ago, the diversity of learners in the Further Education (FE) sector and what they stand to gain from participating in further study was accurately captured in the foreword of the Kennedy Review below. When this report was published, I was teaching mainly adult women learners in the FE sector and can fully relate to the stories Kennedy refers to – of conquering fear, battling odds and the hopes that investing in the self brings. Many of the positive reflections she made about the potential offered by education to change the lives of some of the most marginalised learners are still relevant, and yet this more socially inclusive narrative has been eroded.

> My recent journeys in the world of further education have provided me with a thousand and one histories of changed lives. As with most good stories, they usually describe the conquering of fear, a battle against odds, the discovery of self, as well as the acquisition of skills and knowledge. I like to imagine that like 'Scheherazade' I could captivate you with these accounts, all of which testify to the transformative power of learning. Some are about the precious acquisition of basic literacy, others about studying to degree level using the ladders provided by further education. The variables are countless, but the excitement of success is infectious. For those involved in education these accounts are happily familiar. These stories are what education is all about. They feed the commitment and idealism which is still so strong amongst educators and they fuel the desire for radical change which the committee came to share.
> (Kennedy, 1997, p.12).

This thesis offers a contemporary perspective on adult women learners in FE – a group which Kennedy strongly advocated for. Although they are still enrolled in large numbers in the sector, their interests are absent from policy and their voices have faded from research. This research aims to shine a light on what attracts them into FE, what their aspirations are and what they gain from participating, as well as offering up-to-date accounts of how they manage study alongside their everyday lives.

Chapter One – Introduction

Introduction

The English Further Education (FE) sector has a broad remit which is most commonly associated with providing vocational and 'second chance' education to young people and adults. Despite the vital role that FE plays, it has been marginalised in terms of its funding and status, which have earnt it the reputation of being the 'Cinderella Sector' (Gleeson, 1999), which has been compounded by frequent changes (Norris and Adam, 2017).

Since incorporation in 1992, FE colleges have responded to funding challenges by using 'market' strategies to compete for students from 'new markets' which have traditionally been offered elsewhere (e.g., HE, Adult Education and ESOL) in order to survive (Whitty and Power, 2000; Gleeson and James, 2007; Smith and O'Leary, 2013). This has laid the groundwork for the 'New Public Management' principles, driven by 'markets' and measures of educational quality, as well as 'value for money'. In order to determine these principles, a range of instruments have been used (e.g., league tables, inspections and success rates), as well as publicly available data aimed at 'driving up standards' to ensure that there is a good return on public investment (Hood, 1991; Whitty and Power, 2000; Gleeson and James, 2007; Payne and Keep, 2011; Smith and O'Leary, 2013; Keep, 2015a).

Over the last two decades, adult women learners have consistently formed the most dominant group in the sector who are likely to be taking a valuable 'second chance' to either retrain or complete education that they missed out on earlier in their lives. And yet, there is very little research about why adult women return to FE to participate in vocational education, or what their aspirations are. Furthermore, the complex factors highlighted above along with the recent rationalisation of qualifications and funding

cuts[1], have been particularly detrimental for adult learners' participation. In particular, there has been a drastic decline in adult women learners who have consistently represented the majority of all learners in the sector (by 59%) (DfBIS and SFA,2016; DfE, 2017, 2018). In contrast, other European countries have reported a consistent increase in participation rates over the last two decades[2] (Cedefop, 2017, pp.29–30). According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2019), the decrease in student numbers has been mirrored by a sharp decline in the budget which has fallen by over two thirds (79%) from £4.1 to £1.5 billion since 2003/04 (Britton, Sibieta and Farquharson, 2019). These changes have occurred over a series of phases which can be linked to the political, social and economic context.

In an austerity context, the oscillation of policy and funding between different aims and priorities has left women learners particularly vulnerable to reduced opportunities. In what follows, I discuss how some of these policies have affected opportunities for adult women learners to participate in VET within the FE context over the last twenty-five years, as well as in relation to the broader social, economic and political landscape. In particular, I critically examine the extent to which women have been susceptible to funding cuts in FE during austerity, and how this echoes other public sector and welfare cuts. This chapter is divided into two parts, in the first section I critically evaluate some of the key historical, economic, political and social factors which have had the most impact on women learners' opportunities for learning in the FE sector. The second section provides an overview of the research questions, the thesis structure and my positionality as a researcher.

[1] In particular, to the Adult Education Budget (AEB) which is responsible for funding adults aged 19 plus.
[2] Even when taking into account the UK's methodological changes in 2011, there is a notable decline between 1996-2016 (See Eurostat database indicator tsdsc440).

The Rise and Fall of women learners in Further Education

Further Education in England has been impacted by considerable 'policy churn' and frequent changes over the last three decades. This section charts the changes pertinent to this study starting with the Kennedy Review (1997) and ending with the Augar Review (2019), before concluding with a broader overview of how the austerity context is likely to have impacted on the lives of some women learners.

The Kennedy Review

In 1994, Helena Kennedy QC, was commissioned to conduct a review of Further Education in the United Kingdom — just two years post-incorporation[3]. The report entitled "Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education" was published in 1997, signalling an important moment in the history of FE, and for adult learners in particular (Kennedy, 1997). The report acknowledged the significant investment and growth in education as part of a package of measures aimed at economic recovery following the 1991/2 recession, in an attempt to prevent Britain falling further behind on the international skills league tables. However, the report claimed that the funding methodology which "had growth at its heart … designed to stimulate expansion" (Kennedy, 1997, p.2), had had some unintended and undesirable consequences whereby colleges competed for students in 'the market'. Funding based on 'successful outcomes' meant that growth was asymmetrical as:

> …. the students recruited have not come from a sufficiently wide cross-section of the community and there is concern that initiatives to include more working-class people, more disaffected young people, more women, more people from ethnic minority groups are being discontinued because they fall through the gaps in the system. (Kennedy, 1997, p.3).

[3] Post-incorporation following the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) where colleges gained autonomy from the Local Education Authority.

She argued that the goals of economic growth were too narrow, calling for a reimagining of FE to have the dual purpose of developing human and social capital. Kennedy insisted that:

> Learning is central to economic success and social cohesion …. Recent policies to increase participation and achievement in learning have achieved some success, but mainly in providing opportunities for those who have already achieved to continue to do so. Those who are disadvantaged educationally are also disadvantaged economically and socially; equity and viability dictate that all should have the opportunity to succeed. To continue with current policy at a time of rapid change will widen the gulf between those who succeed in learning and those who do not and puts at risk both social unity and economic prosperity. (Ibid., p.15).

Her report recommended better support and access for non-traditional learners who had not achieved their potential at school, were unemployed or in low paid work. Advising a universal entitlement to funding for Level 3 for adults through accessible and desirable opportunities, at the same time, she recommended that this should be supported with funding for childcare and equipment. She argued that if Britain is to become 'a learning nation' where learning is lifelong and inclusive, it "becomes meaningless rhetoric if money is not available to make such a grand project a reality. And it is a grand project if it is to be real" (ibid., p.9).

Kennedy's assertion that education for adults needed to expand beyond the narrow productivity and human capital goals were shared by other critics who highlighted the broader social benefits of education (Schuller and Field, 1998; Coffield, 1999; Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000; Field, 2005). In particular, Schuller and Field (1999; see also Baron, Field and Schuller, 2000; Field, 2005) insisted that learners acquire 'social' as well as 'human' capital. Field (2005) describes this as a dynamic process that evolves as individuals engage in education, which helps them turn social capital into a usable resource that supports social cohesion. There seems to have been a resurgence of interest in the broader social benefits and transformative nature of lifelong learning (Schuller and Watson, 2009; Barnes, Hughes and Adriaanse, 2016) and FE (Duckworth

and Smith, 2018) for adults which mirrors the narrowing of policy. In particular, these studies have highlighted the benefits of education for well-being, social inclusion and mental health as well as for improving job prospects.

The White Paper, “Learning to Succeed” (1999), followed the Kennedy review and laid out ambitious plans for learning and skills. Its vision was to provide ‘all adults' with the:

> Opportunity to continue to learn throughout their working life, to bring their qualifications up to date and, where necessary to train for a different job. (DfEE, 1999, p.55).

The report estimated that 55% of the population were qualified to Level 2 or below, including “seven million adults with no formal qualifications at all” (DfEE, 1999, p.55). It planned to tackle these deficiencies by “driving up demand for learning” through a range of initiatives such as individual learning accounts which offered a package of financial support (not full funding), and flexible access to high-quality programmes through the University for Industry (UfI).

Growth: Widening Participation, Realising the Potential and Prosperity for All

As a consequence of the policy changes and investment in FE during the early 2000s, there was a sharp increase (40%) in the number of learners participating in the sector between 2002/03 and 2004/05. At its peak in 2004/05, of the 5.7 million learners in FE, 4.46 million (72%) were adults[4].

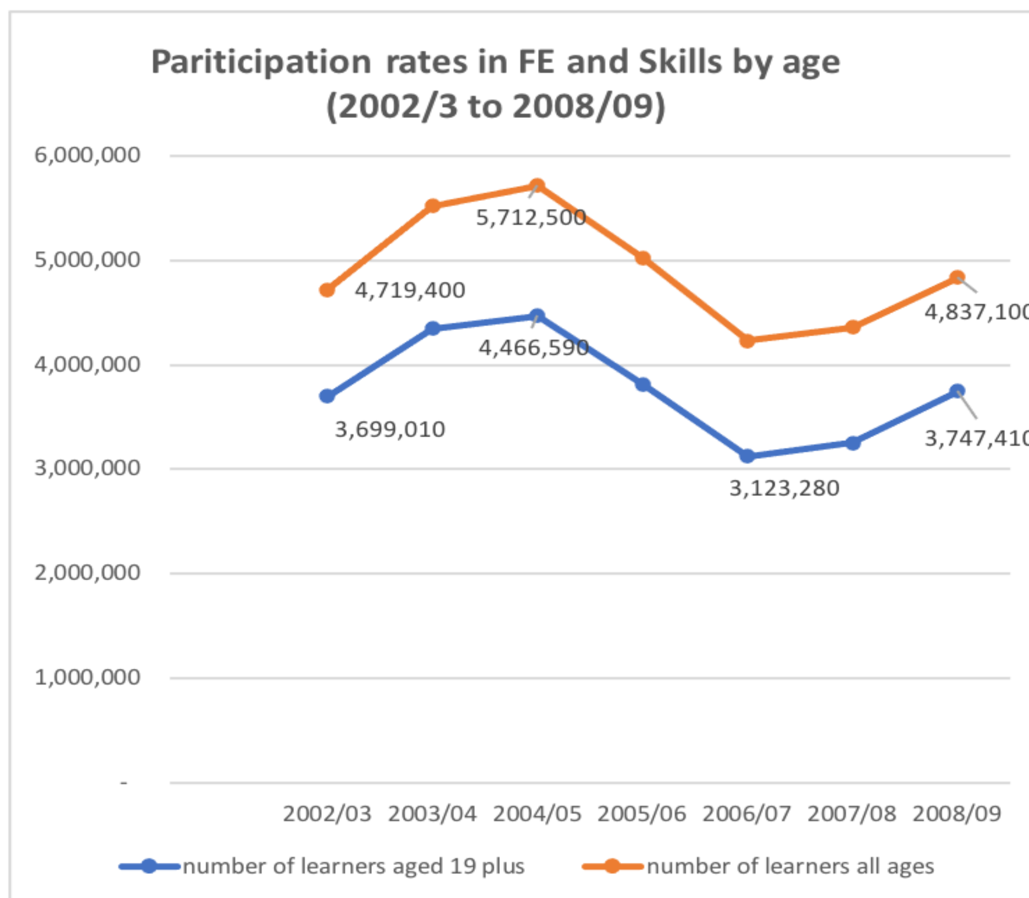

Figure 1: Trends in FE participation by age (2002/03-2008/09)

Source: FE and Skills Statistical Data 2014 and 2018 (Department for Education and Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2014; Department for Education, 2018)

[4] During this period, adults were classified as those aged 19 and above, and learners of all ages includes those aged 14-19.

A closer look at the period from 2002/03-2008/09 (figure 2 below) shows that at its peak in 2004/05, the majority of adult students (81%) participating in FE and Skills were aged 25 and over. Unfortunately, because the Individual Learning Record (ILR) does not disaggregate the data by gender[5], it is not possible to identify which of these 3.65 million learners were women aged 25 plus. There were however, circa 2.85 million women aged 19 plus on FE and skills programmes. These trends remain consistent, which is an important point that I will return to later when considering how changes to funding over time have potentially disadvantaged adults over 25, and women in particular.

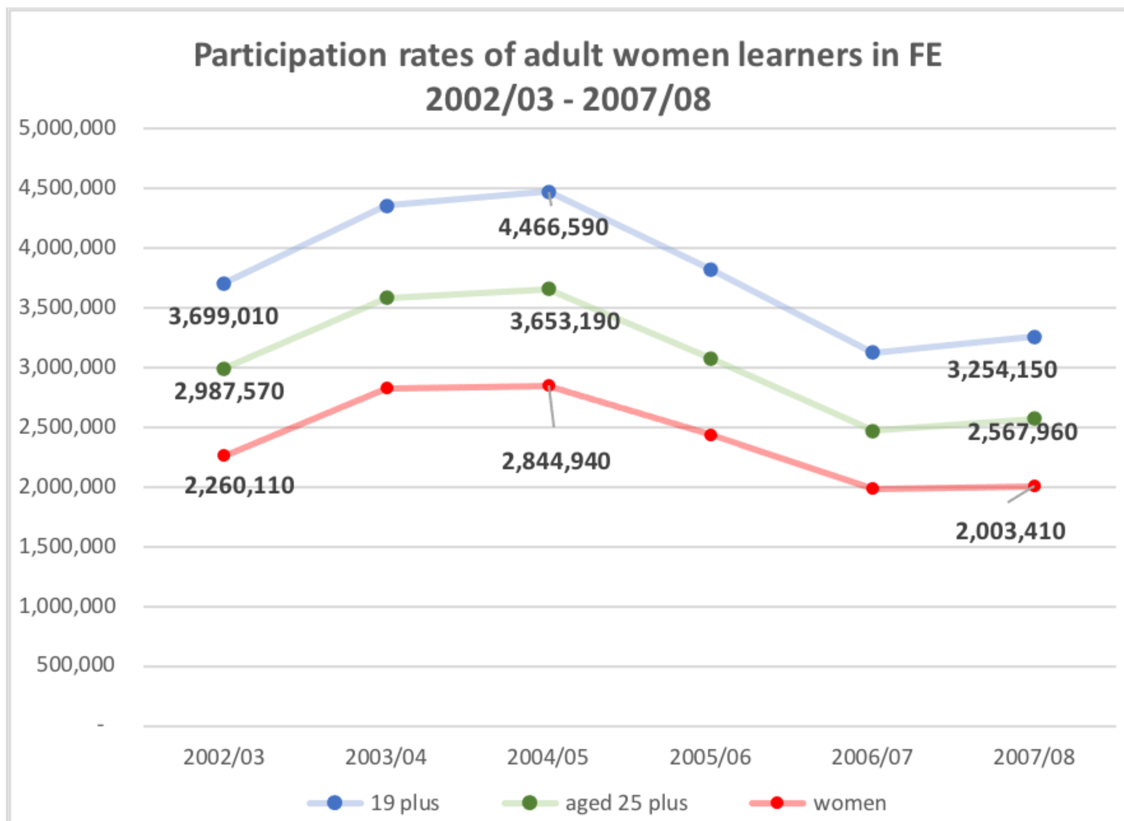

Figure 2: Participation rates of adult women learners in FE (2002/03-2007/08)

Source: FE and Skills Statistical Data 2014 and 2018 (Department for Education and Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2014; Department for Education, 2018)

5 The ILR provides sex disaggregated data for 19 plus only.

The figure below (figure 3) shows that there was a sharp rise of approximately 560,000 (21.5%) women learners[6] between 2002/03 and 2004/05, and although male learners also increased during the same period, it was by a more modest 190,000 (18%). By 2004/05, the majority (62%) of all adult learners (over 19) were women[7].

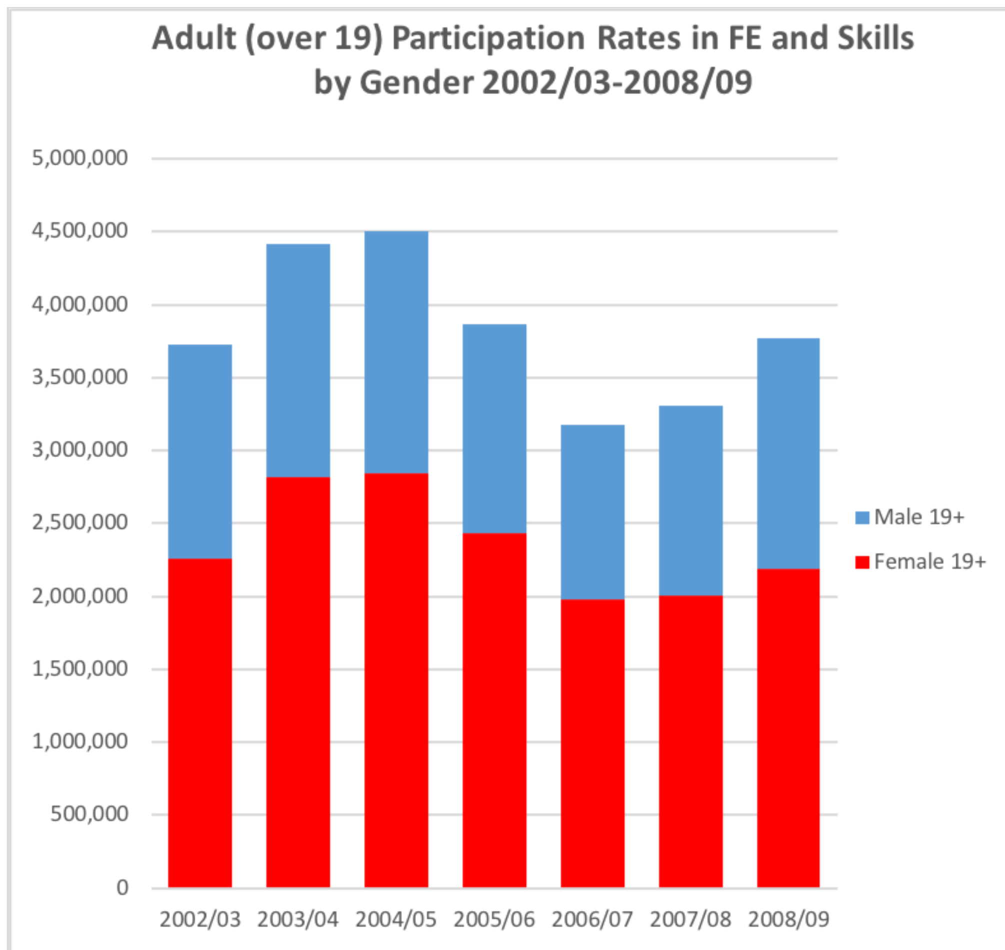

Figure 3: Adult participation rates (over 19) in FE by Gender (2002/03-2008/09)

Source: FE and Skills Statistical Data 2014 (Department for Education and Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2014).

[6] Over 19.

[7] It is important to note that during this period (2002-2008), the data provided on the ILR only recorded participation by gender and age for adult learners as an aggregated figure for those aged 25 plus.

By 2004, the well-worn rhetoric of economic competitiveness and skill level had replaced the ambitious socially inclusive plans proposed by Kennedy (1997). The government commissioned the Foster and Leitch reports which were conducted in tandem during 2004 and 2005. The Foster review (2005), "Realising the Potential", focused on FE sector reforms in response to concerns that FE lacked a clearly "recognised and shared common purpose" (DfES 2006, p. vii), which had failed to deliver the improvements needed. Even though the Foster and Leitch reports had a different but complementary focus, the Leitch report had the most influence on the VET sector.

In 2004, the government commissioned Lord Leitch to review the future skills needs of the country in response to growing concerns about poor economic performance compared to other OECD countries. The review, which was published in 2006 entitled "Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills", set ambitious targets for the UK to become a "world skills leader" by 2020. Leitch asserted that:

> Skills are increasingly critical for the UK to meet the long-term challenge of increasing prosperity through higher productivity and employment at a time when the global economy is changing rapidly. (Leitch, 2006, p.37).

He made his position clear in his recommendations; that public funding for skills must only be awarded for those deemed 'economically valuable', which he defined as those most likely to attract "a return in the labour market"(Leitch, 2006, p.18). Ambitious targets were set out to double attainments at most levels (Leitch, 2006, p.2). One early government response to the skills shortage identified by Leitch was the Train to Gain (T2G) scheme, which funded the first full Level 2 qualification for employed adults aged 25+ that ran from 2006-2010. The White Paper, "World Class Skills" (DIUS, 2007), published in response to the Leitch review, outlined plans to increase funding for T2G, give employers and learners greater purchasing power and devolve administration of government departments to promote the 'employer's voice'.

In essence, the report recommended that the supply led FE system be replaced by a 'demand led' system. Coffield et al. (2008), pointed out that this was potentially problematic in the context of adult education as it is not a 'market', but rather the relationships between tutors and their students that mattered most in helping students to engage with learning and receive appropriate careers advice. Furthermore, they argued that even where demand for courses was high (e.g., for ESOL), "there was not the political will to fund these" (2008, p.20).

All change: The economic crash, the coalition and austerity

The global financial crisis of 2008 marked the end of the longest continuous period of economic expansion on record in the UK which started in 1991. This had a profound and negative impact on the economy and productivity, which saw rising unemployment levels and weak economic growth. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), redundancy levels rose by 170% between January 2008 and April 2009 (ONS, 2021), leading to the number of benefit claims rising by 103% (OECD, 2012). At the same time, GDP fell from peak to trough by 6.3% during the same period (Loh and Scruton, 2018) and took more than eight years to recover. The economic crisis acted as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the global economic system, which resulted in various cuts being made to public funding as part of the 'credit crunch'.

In 2010, the UK saw the election of a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition with David Cameron, of the Conservatives, as Prime Minister. In this new harsh economic, social and political climate, Leitch's plans of achieving world skills leadership were looking unlikely as government funding was reduced (Payne and Keep, 2011; Keep and Mayhew, 2014). Austerity became the critical objective of the new coalition party, which saw a threefold increase in university fees (DfBIS, 2011) and significant cuts to public sector funding. Even though adult learner numbers in the FE sector had already been declining due to budgetary cuts and stricter funding rules, this worsened.

Under the comprehensive spending review of 2010 (HM Treasury, 2010), plans were made to reduce the total adult FE resource budget from £4.3 to £3.2 billion by 2015 (Foster, 2018, p.7), and a strategy document was published outlining the reforms which would achieve these reductions (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). Two reforms in particular were significant for adult learners: The first was the abolition of grant funding for Level 3 and 4 qualifications for learners aged 24 plus (which was replaced by an Advanced Learning Loan [ALL]), and the second was an expectation that some[8] adult learners wishing to do Level 2 courses would co-fund their courses (Foster, 2018). Although adult education budgets are made up of a number of funding streams[9], the cuts which had the most significant impact were those made to the Adult Skills Budget (ASB) — this fell drastically (by 54%) between 2010/11-2015/16 from £2.5 to £1.14 billion.

The incoming coalition government of 2010 commissioned three different reviews of UK vocational qualifications between 2011-2012; namely, The Wolf Review (2011) on post 16 skills education, The Richard Review (2012) on apprenticeships, and The Whitehead Review (2013) on employer engagement. Arguably, the most influential of these and the most relevant to the learners in this study was the Wolf review. Although it focused on the quality of vocational qualifications and employment prospects for young people, its recommendations had implications for adult learners. One such implication was Wolf's call for low-level qualifications (i.e. Level 1 and 2) which "….have little to no apparent labour market value" (2011, p.31) to be rationalised, and for a simplification of the vocational education system. The recommendations made by Wolf, along with those made in the Richard (2012) and Whitehead (2013) reviews, signalled a move towards greater employer involvement in

[8] Learners aged 24 plus who were unemployed taking a first Level 2 qualification would be fully funded. Those aged 19 plus who are unemployed and completing a first or second Level 2 qualification would be eligible for co-funding. Employed learners over 19 would be expected to co-fund their studies.
[9] Including apprenticeships, classroom FE and other workplace training, in addition to community based and offender learning.

qualification design and delivery. This was taken up by the government in their report "Rigour and Responsiveness" (DfBIS and DFE, 2013), where they made it clear that they were keen to ensure that there was "a relentless focus to improve standards and quality" (DfBIS and DfE, 2013, p.27). With regards to adult learners, the report stated that "the existing swathe of qualifications will be simplified" *(*ibid., *p.8*) — a process that would be supported by the independent regulator Ofqual, who would "[b]ear down on qualifications that are no longer fit for purpose" (ibid., *p.29*).

Rationalisation of Colleges and Qualifications

In 2015, the year I started my pilot study, the Conservative Party won a majority in the election, and the programme of austerity that had been started in the previous term did not abate. Strategic Area Reviews were commissioned by the government (DfBIS, 2015), with the aim of rationalising and streamlining FE and sixth form colleges at a regional level so that costs could be cut. The reviews took place from 2015 to 2017 and resulted in 57 college mergers (Foster, 2018; Department for Education, 2019).

As a consequence of rationalisation of qualifications, employer-based contributions, changes to grants, advanced learning loans, cuts to funding and rising employment levels, the period 2008-2017 saw a massive decline in student numbers.

The figure below (figure 4) shows that the sharpest decline in learner numbers occurred in the over 25s, whose numbers plummeted by 1.34 million (45%) between 2008/09 and 2016/17. Although there is incomplete disaggregated data for women learners aged 25 and over during this period, women learners aged 19 plus[10] represented the majority (58%) of learners in the sector but their numbers had dropped by almost a million learners (42.5%)[11] between 2008/09 and 2016/17.

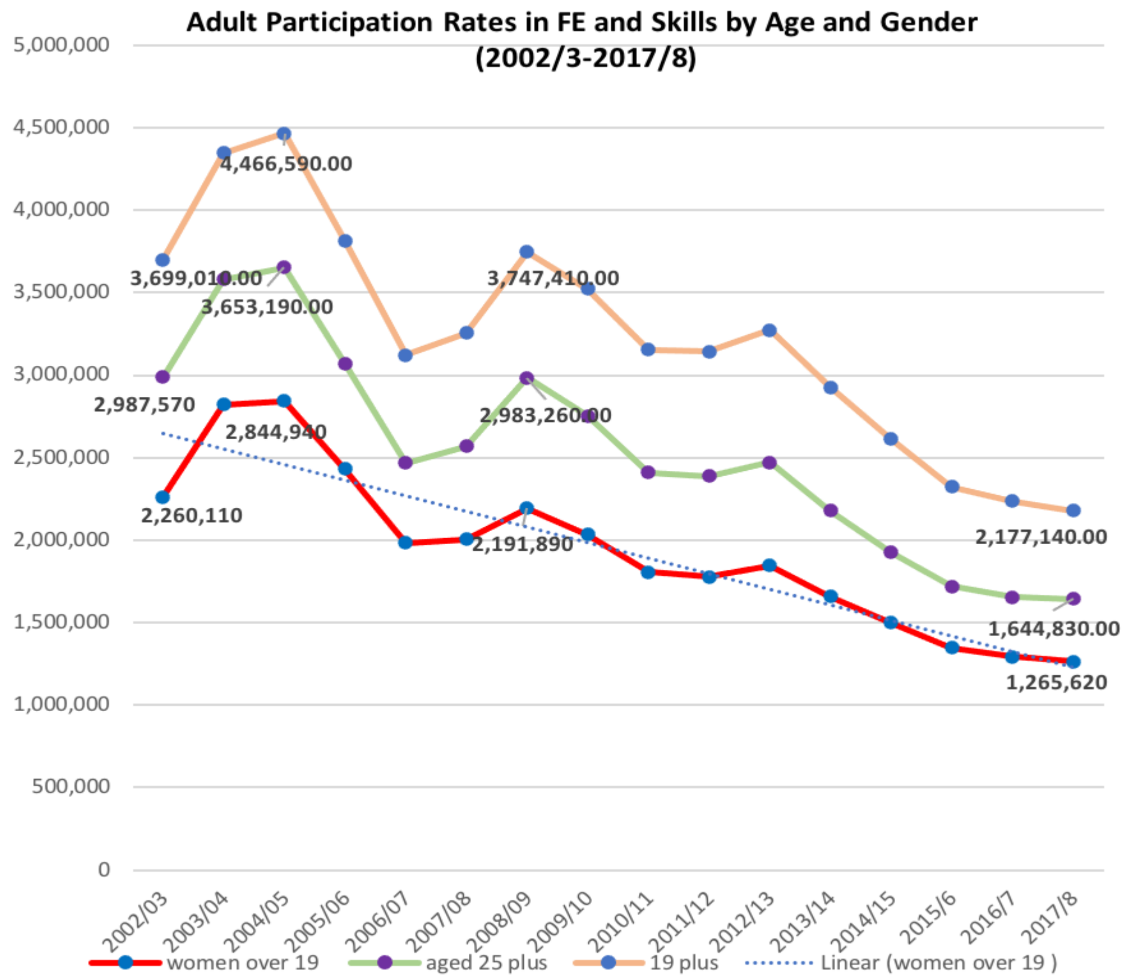

Figure 4: Adult Participation Rates in FE and Skills by Age and Gender 2002-2018

Source: Taken from various sources using the FE Skills Data Table Finder

[10] This figure relates to 2015-16 – the total number of adults 19 plus in 2010/11 was circa 3.25 million.
[11] Figures for those aged 19 and over.

Pertinently, the declining trends of adult women learners since the peak in 2004/05 shows that by 2016/17, there were 1.55 million (54%) fewer adult women learners in the sector[12].

The planned cuts to the adult education budget made between 2010-2015 had been achieved. This was in part due to public funding for Level 3 and 4 qualifications having been replaced by Advanced Learning Loans in 2013 (Augar, 2019; IFS, 2019). The 2015 spending review set the parameters for public spending over the period 2016-17 to 2019-2020, and the newly created Adult Skills Budget (ASB) marked further changes to the ways that the budget was divided. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2018), the ASB represented a shift away from adult skills spending to work-based learning:

> Total spending on adult skills was largely constant in real terms between 2002–03 and 2009–10, at just over £4 billion in 2018–19 prices. However, it fell by about 45% in real terms between 2009–10 and 2017–18. Within this total budget, the composition of spending has shifted significantly towards work-based learning: in 2002–03, spending on apprenticeships and other work-based learning represented about 7% of adult skills spending; in 2017–18, it accounted for over one-third.
> (2018, pp.46-47).

In 2015, Lord Sainsbury was commissioned to conduct a further review of Technical Education[13]. His report criticises lower-level vocational qualifications which he argues "hold little value" (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016, p.8). Consequently, he proposed streamlining some 13,000 vocational qualifications to 15 Technical and Professional Education routes up to Levels 4 and 5. While this review was predominantly focused on skills for young people and the pilot qualifications have

[12] While it is important to acknowledge changes to the ways that learners were counted on the ILR since 2008/09, the figures have been adjusted to show the changes to the formula.

[13] The Sainsbury review was commissioned by the skills minister (Nick Boles MP), following concerns that the UK had failed earlier ambitions of becoming a world leader in skills by 2020 (Leitch, 2006). Sainsbury had predicted that our skills ranking was falling. He claimed that the UK was likely to be positioned as 28th out of 33 OECD countries, lagging way behind France and Germany.

only just commenced, it has potential ramifications for adults too – though it is not clear how this will affect them in terms of their access to VET and their ability to meet the requirements for more extensive work-related placements.

The Augar Review 2019

Since data collection had already been conducted in 2015-17, the government commissioned a review of post-18 education in early 2018. This was chaired by Dr Phillip Augar, and published in May 2019 (Augar, 2019). The findings revealed, amongst other things, that adult learners and FE had been marginalised. It is worth quoting their statement in full here:

> …..what of the neglected, the 50 per cent of the 18-30 year-old population who do not go to university, and older non-graduates? They too are worthy of attention. They are mostly at work and, if they are educated at all after the age of 18, are being educated mainly in further education colleges (FECs). The same is true of older adults in the workforce with basic or intermediate skills, for whom upskilling and reskilling are vital in a changing labour market. There are 2.2 million full and part time adult further education (FE) students receiving £2.3 billion of public funding, a large under-investment relative to the state support afforded university students. In 1989, the then Secretary of State for Education Kenneth Baker described further education as the Cinderella sector but successive governments have failed to deliver the glass slipper. (Augar and Independent panel, 2019, p.5).

The report criticises the diminishing opportunities for adults to retrain in FE and HE. They contend that adult retraining makes sound economic sense; at Level 3, it helps to address skills gaps and promote access to HE, whereas at Level 2, it helps to provide the 6 million[14] adults without a Level 2 qualification "an increasingly important pre-condition for progression at work and to higher levels of attainment" (Ibid., p.53). Their assertions are supported by return on investment and employment data[15].

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[14] This represents an improvement since the white paper: "Learning to Succeed" (DfEE, 1999).

[15] These estimate that Level 3 qualifications offer a 9% earnings return, with an 11% return for Level 2 qualifications. In addition, gaining qualifications increased the chance of being in employment by 4 percentage points (PP) for a Level 3 and 2 PP for a Level 2.

Their analysis of participation in full Level 2 awards by adults (19+) in figure 5 (below) shows that since 2012/13, there has been a drastic decline from over 400,000 to just above 50,000 learners by 2017/18 — representing an 87% reduction.

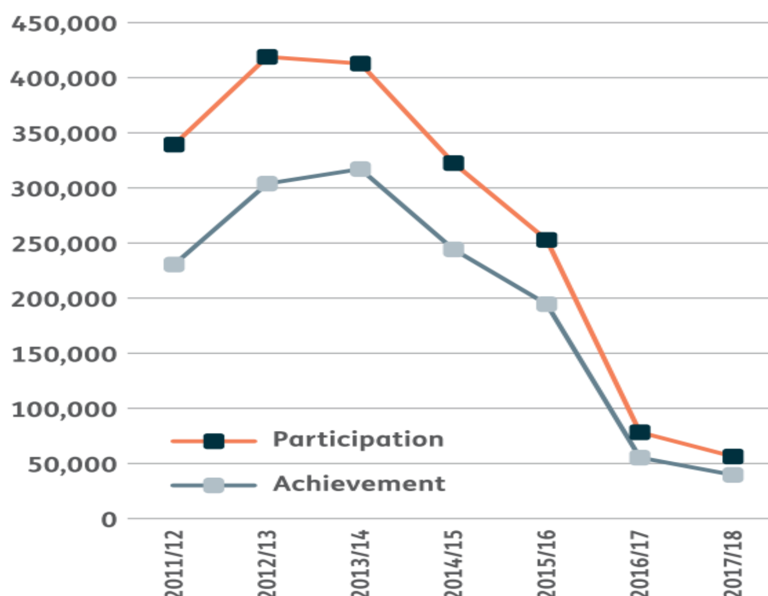

Figure 5: Adult participation in Full Level 2 awards (2011/12-2017/18)

Source: Augar Review, 2019, p.54

While the report acknowledges that some of this decline is due to reclassification of certain qualifications as a result of the Wolf review, they argue that:

> It is beyond debate that the impact of recent funding changes – at Level 2 and …. Levels 3 to 5 - has led to a significant and highly undesirable fall in the number of learners. (ibid., p.54).

However, they attribute much of this decline to the changes in funding arrangements for those aged 24 and over from 2012/13; employed people aged 24 and over are

required to pay half the tuition fees (which could typically be £500), and government support for training was entirely removed.

Similarly, Augar's (2019) analysis (figure 6 below) points out that the number of full Level 3 enrolments for adults (aged 19 plus) also fell by 19% between 2012/13-2017/18. Since 2011/12, the numbers fell from 151,000 to 120,400 by 2017/18 (ibid., p.51).

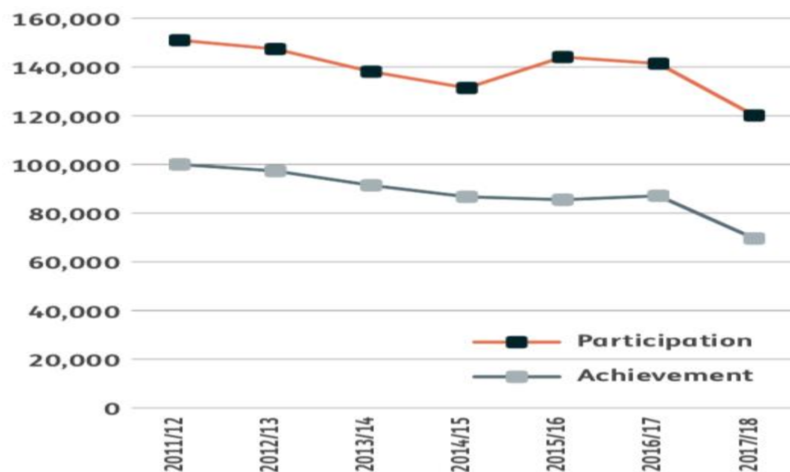

Figure 6: Adult participation in Full Level 3 awards (2011/2-2017/18)

Source: Augar Review, 2019, p.51

The report argues that the decline in Level 3 participation was most likely to be related to the introduction of the ALL from 2013/14, which required learners who were aged 24 and over to pay for their qualification[16]. Augar (2019) reported that there were 100,000 less learners being publicly funded for a full Level 3 qualification in the first year that the ALL were introduced (2013/14), with Level 3 enrolments dropping by

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[16] Advanced Learning Loans (ALL) – for learners who were employed who wished to gain their 'first' Level 3 qualification or those aged 24 and over who already had a Level 3 qualification.

31% (44,5000) from the previous year[17]. Finally, they noted that the decline had been asymmetrical; the number of learners on an Access to HE courses and those on courses aged 24-40 had increased (by 16% and 10% respectively), whilst there had been a 10% decline in learners over 40 and a 61% decline in enrolments for Level 3 qualifications. In sum, the Augar review (2019) recommended an immediate reversal of the two key funding changes made to Level 2 and 3 qualifications, which have affected learners aged 24 and over.

Thus far, I have argued that the ambitious targets set out in the Kennedy review (1997), for 'widening participation' were advantageous for women learners, especially as it gave them access to Level 2 and 3 qualifications alongside a package of support[18]. However, a combination of austerity cuts and the shift of VET policy towards productivity goals has contributed to a decline in women learners. Against this harsh backdrop, those women learners who fail to gain immediate employment, higher wages or a higher qualification are deemed a poor return on investment (Jenkins, 2006, 2017; Blanden, Buscha, Sturgis and Urwin, 2012; Evans, Schoon and Weale, 2013; Beblavy, Thum and Potjagailo, 2014). The impact that the most recent cuts and the introduction of ALL have had on adult learners have been highlighted by Augar (2019). However, there is a lack of gender segregated analysis which shows the ways that women learners have been impacted more acutely by loans and course cuts than men. For example, even though the data is incomplete, the ILR data recorded between 2011/12 and 2014/15 shows an overall decline of circa 279,000 of women learners (aged 19 plus) — of which 238,000 (85%) were women aged 25 plus (Skills Funding Agency and Department for Education, 2016). This suggests that the cuts and policy changes have impacted this group the most.

[17] Augar estimated that this fall in enrolments (around 26%) is estimated to be attributable to the withdrawal of funding, with the remaining 5% being related to higher employment.
[18] Financial support for child-care and equipment – some FE colleges had creche facilities on site too.

What will be notable from the analysis of policy, is that funding for the FE sector is fragile, and policy reform has repeatedly attempted to deliver technical and vocational skills which can compete with other VET systems globally. At the time of writing, despite constant policy reform (Keep, 2015b; Norris and Adam, 2017), this remained the case. In the following section, I focus on how these changes have impacted on adult women learners in the sector.

Women and education in a post-recession austerity context

The negative impacts of austerity on FE only offers a partial story of the ways that women learners' lives have been affected by public sector cuts. In the broader context, British feminist economists have argued that cuts to other public services have been harsher for women as they are most likely to benefit from them. They insist that the lack of a 'gendered' impact assessment of budgets during the austerity period has left women (and children) particularly vulnerable to public funding cuts (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013; Elson, 2016; Stephenson, 2016; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). More specifically, the Fawcett Society (2018) argue that austerity has led to a 'triple jeopardy' for women who have borne the greatest burden of cuts to public sector jobs (which are dominated by women), as well as pay freezes. Also, cuts to public sector services have meant that women have taken on and provided more unpaid care (e.g., caring for the elderly), and have endured the greatest burden of welfare benefit cuts (The Fawcett Society, 2018).

There has been a raft of welfare and tax cuts since 2010; working families tax credit, childcare benefit, housing benefit, benefit caps and the introduction of universal credit (The Fawcett Society, 2018). In addition, there have been punitive measures such as welfare conditionality which has pressured parents into work sooner or risk losing their benefits (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013). It is estimated that between 2010-2017, 86% of the savings in expenditure from taxation and welfare that some of these

measures had generated had been borne by women (Keen and Cracknell, 2017). Furthermore, feminist critics contend that these cuts have affected BME women (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Hall, McIntosh, Neitzert, Pottinger, Sandhu, Stephenson, Reed and Taylor, 2017) and lone single women parents the most (Stephenson, 2016), as they are both more likely to be in the lowest paid and precarious work, as well as being more likely to be claiming benefits than white or coupled women.

Although women's employment reached a record high by 2018 (71%) (ONS, 2018a), closer inspection reveals that this progress conceals the conditions, terms and quality of employment experienced by some women. Firstly, despite advancements towards equality, women are still more likely to be paid 9% less than men for the same role (Roantree and Kartik, 2018), and be employed in the lowest paid jobs in the care, service or education sectors (Pollert, 1981; Cavendish, 1982; Crompton, 2010; McGuiness, 2018; Roantree and Kartik, 2018; Warren and Lyonette, 2018). Secondly, these industries are more likely to offer women zero-hours, part-time or temporary contracts, which not only impacts them financially but also has an adverse effect on health, well-being and childcare obligations (Ball, Hampton, Kamerāde and Richardson, 2017; Kamerāde and Richardson, 2017). According to research conducted by the Fawcett Society, women do not choose precarious contracts, rather they accept them as a result of pressures made on them by the job centres (The Fawcett Society, 2018). Thirdly, the reduction in public sector jobs and pay freezes in recent years, has resulted in women being more reliant on jobs in the private sector which offer less employment protection, benefits and opportunities for progression (ibid.).

FE often provides adult women learners with the first step back into education. It gives them the opportunity to gain qualifications that they did not complete after school, the possibility to update their qualifications after a career break or to train in new occupations which offers them the potential to access better quality jobs. In short, it gives them hope that they may achieve a more stable and fulfilling future.

Paradoxically, the increased financial investment required as a result of funding cuts may feel like a practical impossibility. Therefore, with these cuts in mind and the relative silence around how these cuts have affected women learners' opportunities in particular, I wanted to understand why they return to education and what their aspirations were for their lives.

The Research Study

Thus far, I have described how against the backdrop of the austerity context, women learners' opportunities to engage in publicly funded vocational education have been diminishing. This is important for three reasons: Firstly, women have consistently been the dominant group in the FE sector, secondly, there are very few contemporary studies which focus specifically on why women learners return to VET from their perspective, and thirdly, there is very little research on women learners' aspirations. The purpose of this study has been to offer women learners on VET courses a much-needed voice to share what their aspirations are for their lives and to consider the role that FE plays in helping women to achieve them. This study examines what the aspirations of women learners on a variety of VET programmes in the FE sector are when they start their course of study, how their aspirations are formed, enacted and realised or changed, and the ways in which they navigate structural constraints to pursue their goals.

The thesis has been structured as follows:

- In this chapter, I have outlined how drastic cuts have affected women learners' opportunities to access FE and VET in an austerity context, and the minimal attention this has received in policy terms or from women themselves.
- In ***Chapter two,*** I critically examine the broad literature on gender and FE and Adult women learners, before proposing new theoretical perspectives which focus on aspirations and women learners' lives.
- ***Chapter three*** has three main parts which expand on the literature presented in the previous chapter. Firstly, I explore how the 'aspirations concepts' will be used. Next, I describe what the feminist economics discipline has to offer to the analysis of women's choices and their lived experiences, before presenting the key concepts that will be used. Finally, I outline how these theories will be combined to facilitate an analysis of aspirations which takes account of agency and structure in the context of women's lives.
- ***Chapter four*** provides a detailed overview of the methodology and the feminist approach that I have taken to this research. It contains a description of the various research decisions I have made in the research design including settings, gaining access and sampling.
- In ***Chapter five,*** I present the findings from the first interviews which focused on learners' detailed biographies and what their aspirations for their futures were. It examines how the women learners in this study formed their aspirations and key factors that had shaped them.
- ***Chapter six*** presents the findings of the second interviews and reflects on how learners' aspirations have changed or emerged since the first interview. This chapter concentrates on the ways that women learners navigate everyday constraints in their lives to pursue their goals. It considers not just the extent to which their early aspirations are realised or changed through their course of study, but the broader gains that they achieve that are often unexpected and extend beyond the practical goals they hold for themselves at the start.

- **Chapter seven** draws together the findings presented in chapters 5 and 6 and discusses how these findings add to the VET literature on women learners, as well as the theoretical contribution that the theoretical framing of aspirations and feminist economics make.
- ***Chapter eight*** concludes the thesis by providing a short overview of the key findings and the unique contributions that this thesis makes to knowledge, along with recommendations for policymakers and future research.

Before concluding this chapter, I discuss my positionality as a researcher and what motivated me to conduct this study.

Researcher positionality

As a feminist researcher, I acknowledge the relationship between myself as a researcher, the topic and the researched in the biography which follows (Harding, 1998; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Squire, Davis, Esin, Andrews, Harrison, Hyden and Hyden, 2014; Fraser and MacDougall, 2017). My interest in women learners undoubtedly comes from my own experiences as a learner, as well as the observations I have made during my work in FE.

I came to this research as an adult woman learner, having studied in the English FE sector as a young person on a highly gendered VET programme. Although the context is different, I have a shared understanding of what it is like to return to education with aspirations and face uncertainty. I was raised by my working-class parents who went straight into work after leaving school, my father as a semi-skilled factory worker and my mother as a bookkeeper. While they encouraged me to work hard at school, they had limited knowledge of further and higher education. Therefore, I felt proud that I was the first of my siblings who had progressed straight from school onto a vocational college course. This gave me a skills passport into work which I enjoyed, and ultimately

it led me to become a skills trainer. It was this turning point in my biography that stimulated new employment and educational aspirations, and a lifelong curiosity of education. However, it is my long-standing experience of working with women learners within the FE sector as a lecturer, in addition to my observations of women learners on my BA, which ignited my interest in further study. I joined FE as a lecturer in the post-incorporation period within the Hair and Beauty sector, before entering middle management. This period saw massive growth, competition, and investment in FE, which contributed to a rapid rise of adult women learners who were often unemployed or seeking a second career. It was during this time that I found the notion of 'employability' problematic, especially as vocational courses were only deemed successful if they had high progression rates into employment. Furthermore, I noticed how few women who were enrolling on my courses converted their qualifications into related employment.

During a career break, I returned to HE to complete a part-time degree in Education at Warwick University. Coincidently, the majority of learners were mature women who were either studying part-time or on 2+2 degree[19] routes in partnership with local FE colleges, with traditional aged students being the minority. This renewed my interest in the trajectories and aspirations of adult women learners who, broadly speaking, aspired to either become teachers, early-years managers, social workers or children's nurses. I observed that even with a 'good degree' (2.1 or above), only a few of them realised their aspirations; most often, they stayed in the same role or job that they held before their degree. It was the combination of my previous interests and experiences, alongside enjoying research, which led me to investigate the potential of a PhD study in this area.

[19] The 2+2 degree model involved students spending the first two years studying at an FE college and the second two years at a university.

Concluding comments

This chapter has examined the historical, social, economic and political context which has shaped women learners' participation in the Further Education sector. It has emphasised that they are an important group of learners, not least of which because they form the majority of all learners in the sector, but also because of what they stand to gain from FE. And yet, the ambitious vision of FE as a sector which could support the goals of social mobility and economic growth put forward in the Kennedy review (1997), is barely recognisable in the current context. Rather, the recent policy discourse has shifted towards productivity and economic return. Against these narrow measures, women learners who fail to gain immediate employment or command a higher salary are deemed a poor return on investment. Although the policy and funding landscape in FE is complex and nuanced, there have been some key factors (such as a reduction in the public funding available and numerous changes to vocational qualifications), that are likely to have contributed to the declining trend in women learners' participation in FE. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the influence that changes within the broader social and economic context for women (e.g., welfare, care, work policy and public sector cuts), may have had on their ability to participate in FE.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the empirical research and critical literature on women learners within the English Further Education context, and more specifically, what it reveals about their aspirations. While there has been a flurry of empirical literature on adult women learners in the Higher Education sector since the early 1990s, the literature on women learners in the FE sector has been scant, which mirrors policy reforms (e.g., widening participation). Thus, as women learner numbers have diminished as a result of austerity policy, they have also simultaneously faded from empirical research.

Despite the scant literature on adult women in the FE sector, this chapter explores the literature which is of relevance to this study on choice and opportunity for young women in the FE sector (e.g., Avis, 1984; Cockburn, 1987; Bates, 1990, 1991; Brine, 1996), as well as some on learning transitions (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000b; Bloomer, 2001; Colley et al., 2003; Colley, 2006). Secondly, it explores the qualitative literature available on women learners' experiences and biographies from the broader field of education which includes HE, lifelong learning and FE (Edwards, 1993; Parr, 1996; Merrill, 1999; Burke, 2002; Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller, 2004; Duckworth, 2013), as well as feminist policy discourse critiques (Hughes, 2002; Jackson, 2003; Gouthro, 2005, 2009; Brine, 2006; Webb, Brine and Jackson, 2006).

The broad aim of this study has been to understand why, in the context of austerity, that women return to FE, what their aspirations are and how they change over time. This literature review points to the omissions of women's voices in contemporary FE literature, as well as the scarcity of knowledge on the nature of women learners'

aspirations. Turning to the wealth of literature on choice and aspirations reveals contentious views between disciplines. Its genealogy can be traced back to rational choice theory in economics, which has been rejected by some feminists, feminist economics and human development theorists, who share the view that this is narrow and renders aspects of women's lives invisible. Therefore, the final section of this literature review focuses on the potential to use the intersections between feminist economics (on choice and gendered constraints) and aspirations theories, to examine the ways that women learners' aspirations are shaped by agency and structures.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first section focuses on FE and VET, concentrating on the early literature on opportunities and the reproduction of gender and class, but also charts some more recent views. The next section examines the literature on women learners' experiences, as well as the feminist critiques of the ways that policy discourse ignores women's lived experiences. The final section, 'Towards a new theory', consists of two key parts: The first, responds to the suggestion made within these feminist policy critiques that feminist economics offers a lens to examine women's complex lived experiences and how this constrains their choices and the second, examines the emerging literature on the ways that educational aspirations may be conceptualised.

Further Education: Choice and Opportunity

The Making of Class and Gender

Early research on vocational education opportunities and choices in the English FE sector, criticised the ways in which it contributed to the reproduction of class and gender for youths (Avis, 1984; Cockburn, 1987; Skeggs, 1988; Bates, 1990, 1991; Colley et al., 2003); women (Brine, 1992, 1996, 2006); and to a lesser extent, ethnic minorities (Avis, 1984). Foundational to some of these debates, has been the question raised by Paul Willis, in his seminal work on 'white working-class lads' (Willis, 1978),

about why working-class kids (and adults) get working class jobs. More specifically though, they examined how transitions from school to the labour market are mediated by FE – where the work of reproduction gets "completed" (Bates, 1990, p.108). These studies offer major theoretical and empirical contributions to knowledge on FE and VET as sites of social reproduction. I outline some of the most pertinent ones for this study, whilst mindful that they reflect a specific period and context in FE; characterised by the high youth unemployment (of the late 1980s and early 1990s) that led to youths being offered 'opportunities' to access vocational training via Youth Training Schemes (YTS)[20]

Within this somewhat bleak context, the vocational 'choices' for working class girls in FE during this period were limited to a narrow range of occupations such as secretarial work, hairdressing, care or catering (Cockburn, 1987; Bates, 1991; Skeggs, 1998), which with the exception of catering, were dominated by women. Young women made these choices having adjusted their previous ambitions either because they could not afford the financial outlay required for some vocational courses or they failed to gain the entry qualifications (Bates, 1990; Skeggs, 1998). According to Bates (1990) and Skeggs (1998), most of the young women in their study did not choose 'care', rather, they regarded it a fall-back option having failed to attain the entry qualifications for nursery nursing courses.

Bates (1990) observed how, despite their initial disdain for the work which they regarded as "disgusting and undesirable" (1990, p.102), the "care girls" realigned their aspirations with the labour market with the aim of becoming "good care assistants". Claiming that this must have resulted through a process of socialisation and filtration, Bates asserted that:

> It is difficult to escape the conclusion that it is a highly socially constrained form of 'wannabee' which leads 16-year-old girls to long for jobs working with the senile, the dying and the dead'. (ibid., p.102).

[20] Some of the students sampled in my study had undertaken YTS or YOP or FE courses at a similar time.

Bates argued that the ‘hidden and formal curriculum’ of the YTS was structured in such a way that it made this unlikely transformation possible, which was reinforced within a context of high unemployment; young women were conditioned by the fear of not gaining employment through trying to secure highly competitive work placements. The biographies of young working-class women on care courses in Bates’ ethnographic study (see also Skeggs, 1988), suggested that their propensity to become carers originated from their previous experience of domestic and care work within the family. These experiences and the qualities required to be a “good care assistant” (e.g., being tough, unflinching and unsqueamish), were most developed in the working-class girls. This, according to Bates, offered them an advantage when attempting to gain access to care courses as they “both select for and reinforce specific forms of gender socialisation, initially developed in the family” (Bates, 1990, p.103).

Skeggs (1988) claimed that the young women in her study were motivated by an attempt to gain autonomy and agency by using the cultural resources they had available to them, which sustained gender and social reproduction. The reproduction of gender is evident in the narratives of the working class “care girls” in Skeggs’ study, who suggest distinctly feminine motivations behind their occupational choices. In contrast to Willis’s (1978) “working-class lads” who saw manual labour as the means to gain financial independence, Skeggs’ girls overwhelmingly viewed paid work as a potential “marriage market” to find a well-paid professional spouse (e.g., social worker or doctor), and were keen to portray their femininity and attractiveness through the uniform. She argues that the inevitability of marriage for these girls was made using rational decisions about their future economic security. The girls placed great emphasis on the type of uniform they would wear depending on the job role. Some were considered more feminine and conveying a higher status (e.g., nursing) and more attractive to the opposite sex (see also Bates, 1990, 1991).

Feminist analysis of equal opportunities (EO) and EU policies[21] (from the 1970s to the late 1990s), concluded that they had little impact on broadening the opportunities available for young women (Cockburn, 1987) and adult women learners (Brine, 1992, 1996, 1999) in the English VET sector. They argue that through a combination of patriarchy and capitalism, young and adult women continued to be guided towards 'gendered' course choices which ultimately offer low pay, low status and little opportunity for progression (e.g., care, nursery nursing hairdressing).

In her ethnographic study of young people, Cockburn (1987) observed the ways in which young people[22] on YTS provision were guided towards a range of programmes that perpetuated, rather than challenged, gender-segregated occupational choices. The students in her study revealed how they were discouraged by careers advisors or training agents from choosing 'gender contrary'[23] courses. Cockburn noted a more worrying trend on a small number of courses (e.g., admin/clerical work), where young males were offered preferential programmes of study compared to the young females on the same YTS route (e.g., girls doing typing courses and boys offered business or accountancy). Cockburn insists that 'positive action' is the only way to reduce gender segregation in occupation choices, suggesting that from a feminist perspective, this must not only include women getting into men's work (e.g., engineering), but also to get more males into care roles which could enhance their nurturing skills and give them an appreciation for the demands of women's wider (domestic) roles.

Similarly, Brine's (1992, 1999) policy analysis of training opportunities in England funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), revealed how they had not only failed in their goal to promote the gender equality, but its various programmes were responsible for reproducing gender inequalities (as well as class, race and ethnicity)

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[21] Equal opportunities policies from 1982-89 (Cockburn) and 1976-1999 (Brine).
[22] Young women and men.
[23] E.g., young women doing woodwork or men doing care courses.

and ’under- educating women‘ (Brine, 1999). Her analysis carefully charts how policy iterations (which occurred over five decades) that were enacted at the state level, made policy susceptible to interpretations. Which not only obscured these inequalities but resulted in adverse impacts on what opportunities women learners were able to access.

Brine’s (1999) analysis of policy is highly complex. However, she points to three key periods where policy was interpreted at a local level in ways which served to sustain and reinforce inequalities experienced by women. In the 1970s, ESF funding was aimed at supporting “under-educated working-class women” (1999, p.78) in areas of under-representation, for new jobs or to enable them to gain higher qualifications. However, in practice, they were supported into working class male occupations at the expense of training for technical or professional roles, where there was a hierarchical under-representation of women. By the mid-1980s to early 1990s, the policy discourse had shifted towards supporting ‘positive action’ to support “unemployed women with few qualifications or marketable skills” (ibid., p.80) into new technologies. ‘Positive action’ was interpreted as traditionally male courses (e.g., bricklaying), which was an industry in decline along with word processing (Brine, 1992 cited in Brine, 1999, p.82). Brine argues that this was problematic because these traditional jobs were in decline, whereas technical and professional jobs were the fastest growing area of employment which ensured that: “women have been unable to disrupt the hierarchies of entrenched male power existing at either the highest paid or lowest paid sectors of the labour market” (1999, p.96). Finally, Brine argues that in the 1990s, the ESF funding discourse shifted to prioritise those “most vulnerable to social and economic inclusion” (Brine, 1999, p.85), as well as promoting equal opportunities between men and women. Despite the option to provide funding for ‘women only’ training in areas of work under-represented by women, the government interpreted the regulation to mean men as well as women, and more specifically “low and undereducated women”

(ibid., p.86). Although some discreet 'women only' provision was maintained, they tended to be marginalised from other pathways.

What is evident from both Cockburn's (1987) and Brine's (1999) ethnographic studies, is that equal opportunities policy is open to interpretation at the implementation level in ways that compounds the disadvantage women and girls experience.

Structure and agency – Individualism, identity, and learning careers

Later studies in the FE sector by Bloomer and Hodkinson[24] (1997, 2000; see also Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000, 2001; Bloomer, 2001) have focused on understanding the career choices and transitions made by youths from school to FE (and into work). They acknowledge the contribution of earlier studies on FE, and in particular, the ways that young people are socialised into their chosen vocational route. However, they criticised the lack of consideration given to individual choice in some studies (Bates, 1990, 1991; Bates and Riesborough, 1993) and the processes by which the original course choices were made (1997, p.30). In addition, they have argued that the analyses:

> Often imply a structurally determinist viewpoint that we claim under-states the contested nature of social reproduction and the degree of choice that faces many individuals. (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, p.30).

In response, they propose a reframing of 'choice' which uses sociological tools (e.g., Giddens' theories on 'individualisation') but avoid 'structural determinism'. At the same time, they argue that the rhetoric of 'rational choice theory' underpinning policy pays:

> No attention to the actual decision-making, other than the assumption that it is a simple, technically rational process, where (young) people assess their own abilities and interests, evaluate the range of opportunities which are available to them and then make a choice which matches ability to opportunity (ibid., p.31).

[24] As part of the Transforming Learning Cultures Project funded by the ESRC.

The notion of choice formed the basis of their longitudinal study on the transitions of young people from school to FE and into work (ibid.). They argue that young people's dispositions to learning change over time and can be transformed, which they claim are mediated by structures as well as being culturally and socially situated. They maintain that this is also part of an individual's ongoing reflexive and dialectic process of the self where biography is continuously being revised and updated. The ways that careers choices are made, revised and updated are explained using Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'[25] (1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; 1993) and Hodkinson and Sparkes's concepts of 'horizons for action' and 'turning points' (1997). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue that young people make career decisions within their 'horizons for action' which they describe as: "the arena in which actions can be taken and decisions can be made" (1997, p.35). They contend that both 'habitus' and the opportunity structures of the labour market influence horizons for action in inter-related ways. According to Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997), "horizons for action can limit and enable choices we can make within it" (1997, p.35). 'Turning points' are used to conceptualise the incremental or dramatic changes that shape individuals' choices and decisions, either because they initiate it or because of external changes (e.g., end of post compulsory schooling) or forced changes (e.g., redundancy). They conclude that their empirical research concurs with perspectives on choice and individual responsibility to an extent. However, they argue that transitions are still structured by patterns of inequality (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1998, p.139).

Other work from this team focussed on understanding how learners' dispositions to vocational learning on courses such as nursery nursing, health and engineering change over time (Colley et al., 2003; see also Colley, 2006). Their case study builds on earlier

[25] Their understanding of 'habitus' is that an individual's perception of themselves - which are subjective, are objectively influenced by their social and cultural contexts. They draw on Brown's (1987) phrase 'frames of reference', to suggest that culture and identity are a mechanism within the development of 'habitus' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p.34).

FE research on class and gender (e.g., Bates, 1990, 1991), as well as the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) detailed previously. They explore the role that vocational and learning cultures on specific courses play in the transformation of learner dispositions as a process of [vocational] 'becoming', and how this is mediated through gender and class. They claim that in some cases, learners experience contradictory tensions in negotiating between the 'idealised' and the 'realised' image of a specific vocation. For example, in care work (which is dominated by female learners), they note how the:

> Idealised habitus of providing loving care' is unrealisable. In practice, detachment and even a certain element of harshness form part of a realised habitus that allows learners to perform and cope with emotional labour, to manage their own and others' feelings. (Bates, 1991)[26].

They propose that VET plays a role in disciplinary socialisation (Bates, 1991), which is contingent on the ways that students are immersed "in the vocational culture and demands their orientation to the vocational habitus" (Colley et al., 2003, p.491), as well as being mediated through class and gender. They conclude that childcare is strongly immersing, in that successful learners gain the sense that they are becoming a 'nursery nurse', those deemed to be 'nice girls' who were more likely to be successful in contrast to their counterparts the 'rough girls' who are likely to be filtered out.

Avis (2006; see also Avis and Atkins, 2017) criticises these more recent FE/schools transitions studies (e.g., Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, 2000b; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000), claiming that these reflect qualitative changes over the last three decades such as the "deindustrialisation, globalisation and the competitiveness discourse [in which] education is viewed as pivotal to securing competitive advantage" (Avis, 2006, p.342). He goes on to argue that the culturalist direction in these more recent studies foregrounds individualisation while "class recedes into the background" (Ibid., p.345).

[26] Bates cites Hochschild"s (2012) term 'emotional labour' within this quote

Consequently, the relations of power and inequality, and more specifically the way that "class gets done" is obscured (ibid., p.348).

Avis and Atkins (2017) contend that class is fracturing in their contemporary analyses of youth transitions, which they claim is in part due to the ways in which the economy is characterised by precariousness, underemployment and overqualification. They argue that while the ways that the broken transitions of middle-class youths are "smoothed over through the emphasis on balance and flexibility" (2017, p.168) and presented in a positive light, working class youths are characterised as "being in deficit" (Billett, Thomas, Sim, Johnson, Hay and Ryan, 2010). They argue that although traditional theorisations of youth transitions (class, gender, race and to a lesser extent, disability) are relevant, they would benefit from nuanced understandings of how time and place also shape transitions (Colley, 2009; Webb, 2015). At the same time, Atkins (Atkins, 2017; Avis and Atkins, 2017) calls for us to consider how transitions into the labour market are powerfully shaped by contingent or serendipitous events in which 'advantaged youths' are more able to respond and actively engage with serendipitous events than less advantaged youths. Avis and Atkins conclude by encouraging us to be cognisant "of changes in the class structure, whilst acknowledging the intersectionalities of race and gender" (2017, p.167). At the same time, they note the absence of research on race in FE not only in the UK but internationally also (except for Avis, Warmington and Orr, 2016). In sum, they urge us to consider applying a more nuanced theoretical lens (e.g., serendipity, class fractions, time and place) on youth transitions.

A recent article on the topic of race by Avis, Orr and Warmington (2017) claims that race has been marginalised within VET research. They base their assertions on the number of articles which specifically address race and VET[27] in the most relevant

[27] The sample of 1728 was taken from six journals which are most likely to publish articles on the VET context over a ten-year period.

journals, as well as the statistical data available on race and FE, which is of lower quality than the statistical data available in the school and HE contexts. More specifically, they contend that because the statistical data on race and FE is complex and not comparable, it was difficult to explore racial patterns of inequality over time. While they were unable to find data to support their contention that black working-class youths are marginalised from the mainstream labour market in a process where they are 'warehoused' on 'low level VET' (Avis, Orr and Warmington, 2017), the data did reveal a shift in participation patterns and outcomes for black youths. For example, black youth are less likely to attend FE than white youths. However, when they do attend FE, they are predominantly enrolled on vocational courses (76%) compared to academic courses (13%). Secondly, they are much less likely to be on work-based apprenticeship training routes and perform worse than their white counterparts. Thirdly, they suggest that the drive to improve the attainment of black male youths and their participation in HE has made them more likely to attend university than their white counterparts, however, this does not extend to elite universities where the pattern is reversed (ibid., p.305).

This critique of racial inequality and patterns of participation emphasises the ways in which race has largely been ignored in the VET sector, not just in England, but elsewhere too. Although the critique outlined here focuses on youths, they acknowledge other contributions which reveal the ways in which lifelong learning policy risk reproducing disadvantage in raced, gendered and classed ways (Appleby and Bathmaker, 2006; Hughes, Blaxter, Brine and Jackson, 2006). They offer a serious invitation for researchers to explore the intersection of race and VET, as well as calling for official statistical data which is comparable so that changes can be observed, in order to gain a complex understanding of race and VET.

The seminal studies discussed in this section reveal how opportunities, structures, learner transitions, identity and choice interact in complex ways. Some of these studies

offer a more nuanced understanding of the ways that structures and agency shape choice in dynamic ways, in which learners are positioned as having greater agency than earlier studies., however, the role of social reproduction mediated through class and gender is always emphasised. With the exception of a few studies, they tend to focus almost entirely on youth experiences of school to FE, or FE to work transitions. Furthermore, they should be understood in relation to the time and place in which they were undertaken, as well as their social, economic and political context. Next, I critically consider the literature specifically on women in FE and in education more broadly.

Women Learners

The relative paucity of recent research which focuses on gender and VET was stressed by the editors of a special edition on the subject in the Journal of Vocational Education and Training (Niemeyer and Colley, 2015). They note that since the previous special issue on the subject in (2006), there has only been "small trickle of papers on gender", and call for more to help "grow to a more balanced proportion of the journal's overall content!" (Niemeyer and Colley, 2015, pp.9-10). Interestingly, they acknowledge the contributions of gender studies as interdisciplinary concepts, theories, and findings which they insist have:

> hardly been acknowledged in the area of VET research and practice: with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Bates 1991, 1994; Skeggs 1997; Colley et al. 2003; Fuller and Unwin 2013), VET and gender have remained 'unrelated debates' (Niemeyer 2004). Consequently, the gendered nature of VET has been mirrored in the related field of academic research, much of which seems to remain blind to its own masculinist bias'. (Niemeyer and Colley, 2015, p.10).

They urge us to expand the research on gender (as well as class, race, sexuality) and VET, in ways that take account of the contemporary issues facing women learners in various contexts, such as migration and work, so that the role of VET can be taken seriously.

In this section, I critically consider contributions across the broad educational field (e.g., HE, FE, VET, lifelong learning and adult learning), noting their different contexts while recognising what they can tell us about women learners' aspirations. Biographical and life history research tends to dominate this field offering a rich literature about the experiences and trajectories of women learners on a range of courses (and contexts). There are common and interconnected threads and themes such as previous educational experiences, the patriarchy, motherhood, and identity, and to a lesser extent women learners' aspirations. Some of the literature in this section either resonates with or extends upon some of the literature outlined earlier. Following this, I draw upon some of the international feminist critical discourse on VET, lifelong learning and women learners' 'choice' in the neo-liberal context to argue for an alternative framework on women learners and VET, which takes into account their multidimensional and complex lives.

Educational Experiences and Patriarchy

There are a number of biographical studies with women learners which have theorised that some women learners' educational experiences have been shaped by patriarchal structures. These studies span a broad range of educational contexts such as FE (Burke, 2002; McGiveney, 1999; Daniels, 2010; Parr, 2018); HE (Merrill, 2003; Parr, 2000; 2018) and adult learning (Duckworth, 2013), and yet they have interlinking threads. Patriarchy has been defined as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1990, p.20). Feminist Sylvia Walby (1986, 1989), contends that the system of patriarchy is constituted by six interlocking and interrelated structures which include family, work, the state, male violence, sexuality and culture. In what follows, I focus on some of the key contributions these studies make to our understandings of the ways that patriarchal structures constrain women learners' educational experiences across their life course.

Some of the women literacy learners in Duckworth's (2013) ethnographic study and most of the FE/HE learners in Parr's study (2000), described how they had forfeited their early education in order to take care of younger siblings or to fulfil domestic responsibilities. Consequently, these early experiences had negatively affected their disposition towards education and had impacted their achievements. They described how there was an expectation that they (or their sisters) provided care and domestic support to their mothers as required, regardless of whether this interfered with their schooling. In their roles as "mini-carers", they were responsible for caring for siblings, and some performed other domestic duties (e.g., cooking and cleaning) that their mothers would normally but were unable to, either because they were at work or unable to cope without additional practical support. Many therefore, 'needed' to take the place of their mother at home. Those affected blamed poor attendance (which had been authorised by their parents), for disappointing achievements at secondary school (Parr, 2000; Duckworth, 2013), and as a reason for returning to education later in life.

Fathers played a vital role in enforcing these gendered expectations in a variety of ways (Parr, 2000; Duckworth, 2013). Some women learners explained that their fathers' attitude towards their education was one of ambivalence and disinterest, to the extent that it was sometimes considered unimportant for daughters to gain an education. This was reinforced as some women learners recalled how their brothers' education was treated more seriously, suggesting that as women, they would be expected to follow in their mothers' footsteps and reproduce the traditional gendered roles. Duckworth (2013) contends that, for some women, the patriarchy was enforced by violence which was perpetrated by males in the home towards them, their mothers and siblings during their childhoods. She suggests that those young women who experienced violence in the home were more likely to comply with gendered expectations and miss out on school, despite them potentially acting against their own interests and representing a significant barrier to their progression at school.

Patriarchal patterns of behaviour experienced in early life followed some of the women in Parr's (1996, 2000) study into their adult private lives, whereby controlling and repressive relationships continued to negatively shape their lives. She describes how those women in her study whose lives had been shaped by patriarchal oppression (and in particular, violence), were more likely to leave home, marry/cohabit and have a child sooner, and crucially, they were more likely to experience partner violence in adulthood. Parr argues that the result of these 'life choices', especially unplanned pregnancies, affected some women learners' abilities to pursue their own interests, albeit sometimes only in the short term. However, it was the ongoing violence and trauma reported in many of the biographical studies, rather than unplanned motherhood, that had the most significant impact on some women's lives and imagined futures (Merrill, 1999; Parr, 1996, 2000; Duckworth, 2013).

Violence was a substantive and ongoing issue revealed by more than half of the participants in Parr's study, who experienced what she terms 'mega-trauma', which she defines as the:

> Traumatic experiences started early and have often continued, perhaps in different forms throughout their lives. The stories are of psychological trauma, physical abuse and sometimes both. What separates these students from the others are the major and seemingly ongoing effects of their painful experiences. (Parr, 2000, p.100).

This quote describes how some women learners not only suffered violent, abusive and traumatic experiences in childhood, but this continued throughout their adult lives. Her findings are consistent with narratives shared in similar studies on some women's experiences of various forms of violence and trauma perpetrated by men. The term 'mega-trauma' highlights the complex issues of trauma resulting from abuse in childhood, and how this can be compounded, especially for those women who continue to experience ongoing abuse or violence in their relationships.

The grave effects of experiencing 'mega-trauma' across the life course make it seemingly impossible to overcome, and yet Parr (2000) argued how:

> The women's stories told of lives which had been closely circumscribed by powerful others and of a need to resist this control and gain some independence within their particular circumstances. (ibid., p.118).

She argues that in returning to education, some women are "acting in their own interests", despite experiencing a "great deal of opposition" in some cases (ibid., p.41). Similarly, Duckworth (2013) contends that despite these narratives of oppression and trauma given by some of the women literacy learners in her study, pursuing education is an act of resistance and this helps them change part of their identity. The extremely challenging narratives outlined here remind us of the value of a 'second chance' education for women learners, which offers the potential to not only gain education and skills, but also a chance to reclaim or renew their identity.

'Juggling education': The competing demands of motherhood, intimate relationships and learning

The gendered nature of conflicting demands experienced by adult women learners has been widely documented over the last three decades (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Parr, 2000; Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller, 2004; Daniels, 2010; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Waller, 2010; Stone and O'Shea, 2013; Webber, 2015; Webb, Hodge, Holford, Milana and Waller, 2016; Smith, 2017). These studies reflect different educational fields (HE and FE) but share common themes about the complex demands faced by some student mothers who manage home, family, work and caring responsibilities alongside their education. However, it is important to note that these studies span over thirty years and reflect the social, economic and policy context in which they were conducted, as well as the shifting nature of the family, and to a lesser extent, gender roles.

The ways in which women learners choose to integrate, separate and connect education with their homelife to avoid or challenge the status quo in their intimate relationships, have been emphasised (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Brine and Waller, 2004; Wright, 2013; Webber, 2015; Smith, 2017). In some studies, women articulated how education had been viewed as a threat to their intimate relationships (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1996; Brine and Waller, 2004), which they managed in different ways. For example, the undergraduate women learners in Edwards' (1993) study described how their growing confidence and knowledge (as well as their power and agency), were perceived as threats by their male partners and as a consequence, some chose to lead a 'separate' or 'double life' to avoid conflict. In contrast, the undergraduate women learners in Merrill's (1996) study found that "student life could not be divorced from family" (1996; p.54).; rather, she suggests that friction and changing relationships were essential to challenge the "status quo especially for women who no longer want to be dominated by domesticity" (ibid., p.204).

More contemporary studies suggest that women learners anticipate and manage the risk of conflicts within and threats to relationships (Brine and Waller, 2004), and attempt to integrate and negotiate study with work and family life so that their study does not impinge on, or create conflict within the home (Wright, 2013; Webber, 2015; Smith, 2017). Even though the undergraduate women learners in Webber's (2015) study successfully negotiated support from male partners, however, it was far more likely that the sacrifices of negotiation and integration are borne by the women themselves who have less leisure time and pursue low paid jobs, while seamlessly managing domestic duties and childcare (Wright, 2013; Smith, 2017).

Motherhood and caring featured in more studies on competing demands and participants discussed it in greater depth than relationships, suggesting its importance (Edwards, 1993; Skeggs, 1997; Merrill, 1999; Parr, 2000; Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller, 2004; Daniels, 2010; Waller, 2010; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Stone and O'Shea,

2013; Webber, 2015; Smith, 2017). More specifically, these studies explore how being a 'good mother' (Burke, 2002) were a central concern and although this is not a universal category, it can be characterised in two ways: either as 'being there' for their children and having primary responsibility, or as being a good role model to their children. The former is addressed now, followed by the latter.

Student mothers were keen to ensure that learning had minimal impact on the care (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Wright, 2013; Smith, 2017) or the emotional energy that they normally gave to their children (Edwards, 1993; Burke, 2002; Daniels, 2010; Smith, 2017). The women learners on Access courses in Reay's (2003) study expressed that time spent studying "subtracted them from being a mother" (ibid., p.309), and this puts pressure on mothers who feel:

> [g]uilt in relationship to their learning, seen as a deviant activity stealing energies from their rightful responsibilities" (Burke, 2002, p.104).

Guilt played a critical role in women learners' decisions to study and continue to study in Stone and O'Shea's (2013) study in HE, to some extent, this was contingent on their ability to access and manage alternative childcare which helped to alleviate some of the guilt. Unfortunately, the availability, timing and cost of high quality child care was a barrier to education reported in several studies (Burke, 2002; Reay, 2003; Daniels, 2010; Waller, 2010; Wright, 2013; Webber, 2015; Smith, 2017), and this was a significant reason for the women learners withdrawing or considering withdrawal from the course in Reay's study (2003; see also Reay et al., 2002).

Although some student mothers experienced feelings of guilt as they attempted to be a 'good mother', children appeared to be "a mobilising factor as well as a source of competing demands" (Reay, 2003, p.310; see also Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Webber, 2015). Reay (2003) explains how the women learners in her study have "'collective' rather than 'individualised motivations' for returning to education" (ibid.,

p.309), whereby children and the family feature strongly in women's narratives of why they return to study and what they hoped to gain from it. In particular, the desire of student mothers to support their children's aspirations by being a "good role model" and gaining a sense of pride in their achievements (Waller, 2010, p.62). The 'collective' or shared motivations enables women to "occupy the acceptable space of authentic femininity" (Archer and Leathwood, 2002; cited in Reay 2003, p.309) in which they can pursue their individual goals in a self-sacrificing way, at the same time as supporting the common good and being 'community stalwarts' (Brine and Waller, 2004).

The notion of 'collective' motivations extends to their course choices in which the popularity of nursing, social work, social care and teaching reflects women learners desire to "give something back" and "help others" — a point I return to when the focus shifts to the literature on women learners' aspirations. Focusing on motherhood and relationships enables us to recognise women learners' complex and sometimes contradictory lives, providing a backdrop for us to consider the ways that children (family and community) contribute to their narratives about what motivates them to study, noting the diversity and heterogeneity of women learners' lives. At the same time, it is noteworthy that other care arrangements that women learners perform such as care for elderly adults, (adult or child) sibling care or other vulnerable adults are largely absent from this literature.

Identity and Agency

Identity has been a cross-cutting theme within the literature on women learners' experiences. In what follows, I focus on the learning identities literature. My understanding of identity[28] is that it is a 'social construct', which is constructed and

[28] There are multiple and competing theoretical positions on the nature of identity (e.g., Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1990; Lawler, 2014; Giddens, 2016).

mediated within the social world (Lawler, 2014)[29]. Identity can be thought of as a process of 'becoming' (Goffman, 1990), where one's biographical narrative is constantly being revised as part of a reflexive project so that it makes sense to how an individual constructs themselves. This has been described as 'self-identity' by Giddens (2016). The 'self-identity' does not reflect a single identity; rather, it reflects multiple and often competing identities associated with women learners' differing roles (e.g., mother, partner and employee), as well as the way they see themselves in relation to that. In what follows, I examine the literature on the ways that women learners' identities have been impacted by the early educational biographies and consider the ways in which identity changes as a consequence of engaging in education.

The influence that negative early educational experiences can have on learners has been examined in an empirical study with adult learners in FE by Gallacher et al., 2002 (see also Crossan et al., 2003), who theorised that learners can have 'fragile learning identities'. Even though their study does not focus on women learners specifically, their findings suggest that adult learners who have had a long period out of education, combined with a poor educational biography, are likely to have a more 'fragile learning identity' than the young people in the Bloomer and Hodkinson's studies (1997, 1999, 2000). They suggest that adult learners are often ambivalent about returning to education and "their commitment to the process may well be tentative, and engagement if it does develop, will only emerge over time" (Crossan et al., 2003, p.58). The learning identity is complex in the sense that it does not develop in a linear way, rather it is extremely fragile and vulnerable to changes that happen within their immediate social context (ibid., p.65), meaning that it can progress forward and backwards. Their analysis recognises learner identity is a process of 'becoming', but

[29] Lawler suggests that identity is made up of two components: 'sameness' and 'difference'; 'sameness' relates to common components shared with others (e.g., identity categories) and 'difference' is those aspects of our identity which make us unique.

one that is shaped in the social context by past and present experiences, as well as in relation to their future plans.

Similar conclusions on the complex and fragile learning identities have been made within empirical research which focuses specifically on the experiences of women learners (Brine and Waller, 2004; Parr, 2000; Merrill, 1996; Jackson, 2003; Webber, 2015; Smith, 2017; Duckworth, 2013; Reay, 2003). These studies emphasise that poor educational biographies characterised by poor attendance, low attainment, lack of engagement in education earlier in their life or complex trauma can shape learners' identities in adulthood. These experiences may result in negative feelings about their ability as learners where they lack self-belief (Daniels, 2010), confidence (Parr, 2000; Burke, 2002) or feel incapable of learning (Reay, 2003). The fragile learning identities that some women learners can experience is explored within Brine and Waller's (2004) study on women on Access courses, who found that the majority of women in their study join the course with:

> Weak or bruised identities, and now engage in differing ways with their (re)construction. For each woman, this period of transition is one of great opportunity, yet considerable risk, where failure would further damage fledging identities, now infused with hope. (ibid., p.103).

They emphasise that their fragile learner identities were not only affected by their past experiences of "not being good enough" (ibid., p.103), but also by the perceived support and encouragement they received from significant others (friends and partners), as well as the conflict they feel about their changing identity – which resonates with the earlier discussion on relationships. In addition, some were affected by the process of applying to universities and the rejections that several of them had faced had been damaging to their learner identity (Reay, 2002).

The combination of poor education biographies and difficult experiences in adulthood can act as a catalyst for some women to return to education (Parr, 1996, 2000; Merrill,

1999; Reay, 2003; Brine and Waller, 2004; Waller, 2010; Webber, 2015; Smith, 2017). Parr (2000) argued that some of the women in her study viewed education as a vehicle which could help them to gain control over their lives which had been shaped by negative experiences in childhood (e.g., trauma), or adulthood (e.g., redundancy, divorce, ill health, unplanned pregnancies, or controlling relationships). Essentially, they viewed education as an opportunity to "reclaim or renew" their identity and gain:

> a more positive self-image, the respect of others proving ability and independence, all of which are concerned with the women's need to re-define at least a part of their identities in their own way through education. (Parr, 2000, p.118).

Parr suggests that depending on their experiences, some women learners needed to redefine their identities as a response to the trauma that they had experienced throughout their lives. This could be classified as a form of resistance in which they navigate tightly controlled structures in an attempt to reclaim agency and independence. While this independence may not extend to all aspects of their lives, it can be considered one step towards transforming part of their identity (Parr, 2000; Duckworth, 2013).

Women Learners' Aspirations

Thus far, this section has addressed women's experiences of education, identity and how they integrate learning with the rest of their commitments. There has been scant research which focuses specifically on why women return to FE and what they hope to gain from doing so. In what follows, I outline the research on women learners' aspirations, and as in other sections, it has been necessary to draw from a broad range of educational fields.

Earlier literature on 'women returners' and their participation claimed that "virtually all studies of women returners comment on their lack of confidence, low aspirations and expectations" (McGiveney, 1999, p.15; see also 1993). Controversially, McGiveney

(1999) contends that women learners “need to raise their aspirations and qualification levels” (ibid., p.27), theorising that women have psychological barriers related to a combination of traditional gender-based attitudes, where unpaid domestic work is not valued and leads to low self-confidence and low aspirations. Moreover, she argues that there are material barriers in the labour market which offered little incentive to re-engage with education, stating that:

> if employers continue to recruit them to part time, low skilled and low paid jobs with no prospect of advancement and few training opportunities, then there will be little encouragement or incentive for women to raise their sights and seek higher skills and qualifications. They will consequently remain marginalised as a labour reserve. (McGiveney, 1999, p.27).

McGiveney does not define what she means by ‘low aspirations’ in this report. However, this quote hints that they refer to women who do not have the aspirations to gain higher qualifications and skills. It is important to note that these reports were concerned with maximising the number of women entering the workplace, and training was viewed as a vehicle to support this transition into work. More recent empirical work has considered broader conceptions of aspirations defined by learners, which extend beyond the instrumental goals of employability and qualifications.

The gendered differences in aspirations between men and women learners have been explored by Reay (2003; see also Reay, Ball and David, 2002), who found that men are much more likely to undertake education with individual goals and for instrumental reasons (e.g., higher qualifications leading to better pay), whereas women learners are much more likely to undertake a degree to “evoke a love of learning” (Reay, 2003, p.304) and with collective (family oriented) goals in mind. In contrast, Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found no significant gendered differences in aspirations in their mixed method study of HE; rather, both the men and women in their study had aspirations of gaining higher qualifications and to change career. And yet, some of the female learners in their study described how their aspirations to complete a degree

were “triggered by a change in their personal life and family circumstances” (ibid., p.793). These provide useful insights into the gendered differences in aspirations and more specifically according to Reay (2003), how women’s aspirations are broader than the instrumental goals which McGiveney focuses on.

Parr’s (1996; 2000) study of why women return to education (predominantly FE but also HE) started with the premise of barriers and asked: if there are so many barriers to overcome, why do women return to education? Parr categorised women learners’ aspirations as practical aspirations (e.g., employment/family finances) which she argues relates to fulfilling others’ needs, and personal aspirations (e.g., confidence and status, proof of ability, to have a public identity and as therapy) which reflect one’s own desires. She observed that respondents seemingly changed their aspirations across the interview which had a specific sequence of practical before personal, or to put it another way, others’ needs before their own. Parr theorises that patterns of gender socialisation influence women to describe their aspirations in relation to others, so that they are not viewed as selfish. Parr is keen to stress that these ‘types of aspirations’ (personal or practical) are not contradictory or competing: “they are not mutually exclusive and in fact clearly interface with one another in many ways” (2000, p.25). The categorisation of types of aspiration in Parr’s study in particular (but also by Reay, 2003) is useful as it helps us to consider that aspirations might be articulated differently over time, be that in a single interview or over a series of interviews. At the same time, this study (as with others) does not analyse the ways that aspirations are formed and enacted, nor does it consider the influence that previous experiences have directly had on aspirations.

The biographical literature on adult women learners in this section provides a detailed understanding of their experiences and some of the barriers they negotiate in order to participate. The scant literature on women learners’ aspirations revealed that they were broader than the instrumental goals of education (e.g., qualifications), rather

they extend beyond their own goals to include those which might benefit others. However, it does not consider the ways in which women learners' aspirations are formed and enacted.

Towards a new theory

The previous section charted the relatively scant literature on women learners in FE, and specifically the paucity of research on their aspirations. While the biographical research with women learners provides rich detail about their complex lived experiences and what education has to offer them, their aspirations need to be understood against the backdrop of austerity policy. This section is divided into two interlinking parts: The first explores feminist economic theories on 'choice' and the gendered constraints on choice, and the second examines the emerging literature on educational aspirations.

I was first introduced to feminist economics thought in my initial readings on the debates about the theorisation of 'choice' and 'aspirations', however, it was not until I searched for its application within education research that I discovered a small number of feminist [economics] critiques of lifelong learning and VET discourse for women learners (e.g., Jackson, 2003; Blackmore, 2006; Leathwood, 2006). The work of the Women's Budget Group(WBG)[30] in particular — whose gendered and intersectional analysis of the impact of austerity policy on women in the UK, resonates with some of the ways women learners' aspirations are constrained, as well as the positive contribution that education makes to women's broader lives. In what follows, I describe the feminist economics discipline and critically examine the key feminist

[30] The Women's Budget Group (WBG) is a charity which works with researchers and university-based academics to provide qualitative and quantitative analysis of the ways that various public policies impact women (which takes account of intersectional disadvantage), in order to lobby the government about issues affecting women.

economics debates relevant to this thesis. This is followed by an exploration of the emerging literature on aspirations, noting that this will be expanded upon further in the theoretical framework later. While these may appear to be an eclectic mix of theories, there are synergies between some of the most recent literature on aspirations and feminist economics theory, which both draw on, and contribute to, the literature within the human development tradition.

Feminist economics: What is it?

The discipline of Feminist Economics is relatively new; the International Association of Feminist Economics (IAFFE) was founded in 1990 by a group of academics and a peer reviewed journal (Power, 2004; Strassmann, 2004). Its soft boundaries have attracted contributions to the journal from a range of disciplines beyond economics (e.g., sociology, development studies, economics, sociology of work, philosophy, law, social policy and education), and it has been successful in offering a broad and interdisciplinary space. Feminist economics has been described as the study of "how the economy affects women, and how women affect the economy" (Donath, 2000, p.115), but its framework makes it applicable to all, regardless of gender (Strober, 2003, 2005).

Over the last three decades, feminist economists have insisted that economics should take a broader perspective of economic and social life. Their literature (with gender being central to these) makes key contributions which are relevant to this thesis. Early feminist economics deconstructed neo-classical economic theories which are based on 'androcentric' assumptions about the market, market value and choice - many of which are evident in education policy rhetoric (Ferber and Nelson, 1993, 2003; England, 1993; Strober, 2004; Peters, 2003). These critiques have formed the foundations of further analysis of aspects of social life (such as care and well-being) which they claim are deemed to fall outside of the market, but essential to life and to

support the economy which are ignored (Donath, 2000; Power, 2004; England, 1993; Waring, 1990; Robeyns, 2003; Folbre, 1988).

The breadth of topics has expanded to cover a wide range of themes on feminist theory such as the labour market, care economy and unpaid work, time use, family and social policy, gender mainstreaming, gender sensitive budgeting, income inequality and capability deprivation, amongst others[31]. Finally, they insist upon a broader economic perspective of social life which values the consumption benefits (e.g., pleasure, well-being, agency) of education for example (Strober, 2003; 2005), using a gender sensitive lens and offers alternatives. Feminist economic perspectives have been shaped by and used across vastly different economic, social and political contexts. Despite this variation however, Power (2004; 2013) argues that the perspectives converge on five key theoretical areas which include: caring labour; well-being; agency; ethical judgements and intersectional analysis. The aim of this brief overview of feminist economics was to emphasise the breadth of topics covered as well as its interdisciplinary potential.

The remainder of this section focuses on three key areas of feminist economics theory which include: An explanation and critique of 'rational choice theory' which underpins some of the choice and aspiration literature, the feminist economic framing of education policy discourse, and finally, some of the critique on the division of labour (work, care, time and bargaining).

Feminist Economics Critique of Education

As outlined previously, because feminist economic theory is a broad and interdisciplinary space, it lends itself to being applied to a variety of contexts, and

[31] Such as the environment, Land and Rural Development, Human Rights, Financialisaton and Global Trade.

especially where women's lived experiences are concerned. Although feminist economics thinking has been deployed in education research on policy discourse for women learners (Blackmore, 1997, 2006; Jackson, 2003; Leathwood, 2006), it has not been used as an analytical tool in empirical research in the English context with the exception of one study in HE (González-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009).

Feminist economists have avoided direct critical analysis of education with the exception of Strober's (2003, 2005) work . Strober problematises the dominance of mainstream economics in education policy, contending that the market, choice, competition, value and human capital theory are unsuitable for education contexts. She argues that these frameworks are narrow and fail to acknowledge the broader value of education[32] beyond investment benefits to the individual, describing that the consumption benefits of education (e.g., pleasure) are of little interest to economic theorist (2005, p.266). Rather, Strober insists that the consumption benefits of education contribute to well-being in its broadest definition and cannot be measured in economic terms. She insists that the remedy lies in revisiting the plea made in 1776 by Adam Smith (cited in Nelson, 1993, p.23) for economics to consider a social provisioning[33] approach which shifts the "focus from analysing choices to concern with studying the provision of material well-being" (Strober, 2003, p.148). While she acknowledges this is a 'giant step', she contends that this approach would "Provision every student, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status, with knowledge for living life" (ibid., p.148). Although Strober's critique focuses on youth provision in

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[32] While Strober's critique is aimed at school and university contexts it is of relevant to the FE context.
[33] Power (2013, 2004; see also Nelson, 1993) suggests that even though 'social provisioning' must be contextually specific, she proposes that caring labour, well-being, agency, ethics and intersectionality are areas of consensus between feminist economists and are useful starting points for analysing 'social provisioning'. Power provides examples from different contexts of the hours spent by women outside of the exchange economy, and considers issues of well-being, agency and dignity, whilst acknowledging diverse experiences. Power contends that "the analysis developed will be complex, messy, and nondeterministic; but also rich, multi-layered, and deeply humane" (2013, p.15).

school and university, these debates have relevance across the life-course and education sectors. More specifically, her suggestion that economic analyses should be more broadly defined to encompass the consumption benefits and material well-being of education, is highly relevant to women learners, for whom learning has far-reaching benefits.

The feminist economic critiques of the neo-liberal policy discourse by education researchers echo some of Strober's (2003; 2005) concerns, however, they specifically relate to women learners and the VET/lifelong context (e.g., Leathwood, 2006; see also Ferber and Nelson, 1993; Blackmore, 1997, 2006; Jackson, 2003; Gouthro, 2005; Dainels, 2009). Ostensibly, they argue that the education policy discourse of 'choice', 'productivity' and 'human capital' is grounded in 'androcentric' economic theory which regards "culture, race, gender and class as neutral domains" (Blackmore, 2006, p.13). Consequently, the complexity of women's lives and their broader life goals, as well the consumption benefits of education that Strober (2003; 2005) refers to, are ignored.

Leathwood (2006), draws on feminist economic critique of 'rational choice theory' (RCT see Ferber and Nelson, 1993), to argue that women learners are incorrectly framed in policy discourse as "rational choice making individuals" who make choices in predictable, rational and selfish ways (2006, p.44; see also Jackson, 2003). Rather, she agrees with the arguments advanced by feminist economists which suggest that because women (learners) are more likely to have primary caring responsibilities, their 'choices' are more likely to consider the impact on, as well as the needs of others. The reference to choice theory made here may seem illogical, but the close relationship that it bears to theories on aspirations and preferences will become evident in the subsequent section and in the theoretical framework.

The 'productivity' discourse of education policy has received the most attention from feminist critics, who reject the value placed on 'productive' (paid) work to the

exclusion of other (unpaid) work which they claim is highly gendered, as well as racialised and classed (Jackson, 2003; Strober, 2005; Hughes, Blaxter, Brine and Jackson, 2006; Leathwood, 2006; Webb, Brine and Jackson, 2006). Jackson (2003) insists that the productivity rhetoric is problematic for women learners, because its focus on upskilling, employability and work, renders their unpaid labour "invisible" (Leathwood, 2006, p.43). These theoretical critiques are not claiming that 'productivity' goals are unimportant or unnecessary, rather, they reject any suggestion that they are more important than 'unpaid work' and the narrow conceptions of what work entails.

The feminist critiques outlined here problematise the narrow economic assumptions underpinning neo-liberal policy discourse, which frame women against a dominant masculine economics view which fails to understand their broader lives or what they want to achieve from participating in education. This critical literature rejects economic notions of 'choice' and 'productivity' in favour of feminist economic theories which makes visible the complex constraints that women learners negotiate. While feminist economics makes a novel theoretical contribution to these debates, it has not been deployed in a substantive way within empirical studies on women learners. In what follows, I explore feminist economics theories and consider how they can contribute to understanding the ways that women learners work towards their aspirations.

Work, care, leisure and bargaining

Work and care[34] are viewed by feminist economists as not only being interrelated and interdependent but vital to supporting the economy (Folbre, 1994; Waring, 1999; Donath, 2000; Power, 2013). These assertions reflect the criticisms made by feminist

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[34] Care is defined as paid and unpaid care work which encompasses child, elderly and disability care.

economists that women (and their reproductive labour) are invisible in neo-classical economics which focuses on the market (Waring, 1990; England, 1993, 2003; Nelson and Ferber, 1993). According to Nelson (1993), this narrow view of economics to the market has not always been the case, citing classical economist Adam Smith who asserted that economic analysis should take a broader 'provisioning' approach which captures the creation and distribution of the "necessities and conveniences of human life" (Smith, cited in Nelson, 1993, p.23). And yet, as Donath (2000; see also Folbre, 1988, 2004) points out, the provision of care is regarded as 'the other economy' which is peripheral to the 'real market economy', where one occurs in the household and the other in the market[35]. Donath (2000) insists that while these economies are treated as "conceptually separate", there is no "neat demarcation" between the two or where they operate, rather, they are "inextricably intertwined like strands of DNA" (ibid., p.117).

There is a sophisticated and rich literature criticising New Household Economics (a sub-section of mainstream economics) which attempts to explain how decisions or choices are made within the household (Folbre and Hartmann, 1988; England, 1989; Folbre, 1994; Wolfe, Ferber and Nelson, 1994; Bergmann, 1995; Woolley, 1996; Waring, 1999). In particular, Folbre and Hartmann (1988) challenge Becker's (1981a, 1981b) economic assumptions made about the (gendered) division of paid and unpaid labour, whereby:

> If women earn less than men in the marketplace but are more productive in the home, they will specialise in home production and maximise the family's joint utility (Folbre and Hartmann, 1988, p.189).

'Joint utility' is a contested concept because it subsumes the interests of the family under the 'male-headed' household (England, 1993; Katz, 1997; Connell and Pearce, 2016), and assumes that resources are distributed equally (Bergmann 1991; Woolley, 1996).

[35] To clarify, the 'market' relates to the purchasing of goods or services.

The theories of 'market behaviour' such as 'productivity' and 'consumption' which underpin Rational Choice Theory (RCT), have been criticised by feminist economists for their failure to value or consider contributions made to the economy which have 'use value' (e.g., unpaid care/household labour/community work), but not 'exchange value' (see Folbre, 1988; Waring, 1990; Donath, 2000; Himmelweit, 2002; Power, 2004;). Related to this point, are the assumptions made about the ways that individual choices have been theorised in relation to the household by Becker who posits that there is "altruism in the family and selfishness in the market place" (1981b; p.10). Strassman (1993) has criticised the assumptions that this makes about the primacy of the 'male headed two-person household' with a 'benevolent patriarch', claiming that distribution is not always fair, and leaves power unexamined because women are often in an inferior bargaining position. Moreover, this heteronormative view of households "reduces to invisibility" the diversity of closely bonded groups who share the same household unit (Bergman, 1991 p.141). Becker's models (1974, 1981b, 1981a) neither entertains the possibility of resistance in the form of intra-household 'conflict' or 'bargaining', nor considers how power and exploitation (Katz, 1997) and 'gendered constraints' (Folbre, 1993) are disguised. These critical perspectives have been foundational to building alternative models where the complex relationships of power, agency, gendered constraints, household bargaining and alternative families can be understood.

While returning to education as an adult woman learner offers potential benefits in terms of economic prosperity (e.g., higher wages or better work conditions), there are associated costs of time and money which can be major constraints for women[36] (Folbre, 1988). Women learners are likely to use leisure time to pursue their course of study, which according to the evidence on time-use, is probably in short supply (Folbre

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[36] 'Gendered constraints' are always mediated through race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, marital status, (dis)ability and age.

and Hartmann, 1988; Folbre, 1994, 2004, 2012; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre and Matheson, 2003; Warren, Pascall and Fox, 2009). Women are more likely to be responsible for caring responsibilities and to work part time, however, the differential in time equality cannot be explained by the division of paid and unpaid labour or working hours alone. For example, even when couples have the same working hours women still have less leisure time, this has been attributed to the 'second shift' whereby women complete the majority of unpaid household labour and care responsibilities (Hochschild, 2012). Moreover, leisure time poverty is compounded for lone mothers who have complex care and work arrangements to balance (Albelda, 2002; Himmelweit, 2002; Albelda, Himmelweit and Humphries, 2004; Power, 2004). It may be necessary for women learners to use childcare services to free-up time for study. However, depending on who pays for the childcare, this may prove to be a significant financial barrier – especially as women are more likely to be responsible for paying for child care[37] (Lundberg and Rose, 2000) whilst earning less than men (Wolfe, Ferber and Nelson, 1994; Waring, 1999; Donath, 2000; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre and Matheson, 2003; Power, 2004; Warren, 2010; Folbre, 2017). Even though universal childcare policies may offer free childcare places, these are usually limited, and often related to work conditionality (McKay, Campbell, Thomson and Ross, 2013; Elson, 2016). Therefore, the nexus of time and money can act as a significant 'gendered constraint' on choice, because as Folbre (1994) contends: "you cannot do anything without time, and you cannot buy anything without money" (1994, p.54).

The complex ways that assets (time and money) are brokered and distributed within households, have been explained using game theory (Lundberg and Pollak, 1996) and household bargaining theory (Agarwal, 1997; Katz, 1997). Game theory uses a bargaining model to describe how 'cooperative conflict' occurs (Lundberg and Pollak, 1993) "in the shadow of the possibility of divorce" (England, 2003, p.49). According to

[37] Bitmann et al. (2003) estimated in their study that women spend 50% of their income on their children/child-care.

this view, it is the tension between an individual's utility (i.e. income) and their 'fall back' position (threat point) which determines their bargaining power; this follows the logic that those with a higher individual utility, are placed in a better bargaining position against the threat of divorce (threat point) (Lundberg and Pollak, 1993). Utility outside the marriage depends on factors such as gender discrimination, access to welfare and child support for single parents, where "optimising individuals can compare utility within the marriage to that outside of it" (McElroy and Homey, 1981; see also Folbre, 1994).

Implied within cooperative conflict models, is that it is a game with two players where the rules are symmetrical – a point which feminist economics scholars have contested, claiming that it ignores the ways that power, agency and social norms impact on the terms of bargaining (Seiz, 1991; Nelson, 1993; Agarwal, 1997; Katz, 1997). These critics insist that household bargaining needs an interdisciplinary lens capable of understanding the qualitative (as well as quantitative) issues involved. More specifically, Katz (1997) argues that a better understanding is needed of the asymmetrical ways that 'voice' (who is able to bargain, on what basis and with what knowledge), and opportunities for 'exit' (e.g., being able to construct alternative options/fall back positions) impact on cooperation and conflict. The role of social norms in bargaining has also been acknowledged by feminist economists (Folbre, 1994, 2012; Agarwal, 1997; Katz, 1997). Agarwal (1997) argues that social norms impinge on bargaining as they set limits on what can be bargained about; they are a determinant or constraint to bargaining power, they affect how the process of bargaining is conducted (overtly, covertly, aggressively or quietly), and the social norms themselves are subject to negotiation (1997, p.15). Feminist economics contributes a broader understanding of household bargaining which brings into sharp relief the ways that power, agency and social norms can constrain or enable bargaining in complex ways.

Aspirations, choice or preferences: Some theoretical perspectives

'Aspirations' are an interdisciplinary concept and much of the theoretical work has been undertaken within the economics, anthropology, social psychology, philosophy and behavioural psychology traditions. 'Choices' and 'aspirations' tend to be used interchangeably in the literature, which as Appadurai (2004; see also Leßmann, 2009) points out, is probably because aspirations are a set of choices and preferences which lead to the end goal or achievement of aspirations. And yet, it is individual 'choice making' and 'preferences' which tends to dominate the literature, particularly within neo-liberal policy discourse which is influenced to some extent, by the neo-classical economics theories on 'choice' and 'markets' (Arrow, 1951; Becker, 1974). 'Choice' is given more prominence in neo-classical economic theories (Arrow, 1951; Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1981b; Mincer, 1984), whereas in contrast, 'preferences' (or tastes) are emphasised in the liberal, development, philosophy and feminist economics literature (Sen, 1985, 1990; Nussbaum, 2000; Elster, 1983; Folbre,1994). The distinctions between these two terms reflect differing epistemological and ontological perspectives. Given the influence that economic 'choice' theory has had on the dominant policy discourse and the opposition it has received from feminists (and feminist economists in particular), it is worth pausing to outline some of them here, before examining the aspirations literature more closely

Feminist economists have critiqued the assumptions made by neo-classical economists on theories of choice (rational choice theory) in seminal texts such as in "Beyond Economic Man" (see Ferber and Nelson, 1993; 2003)[38], where they contend that they:

> [D]efine economics in terms of real-world issues of concerns to men, women and children, rather than examination of choice under conditions of scarcity (Ferber & Nelson, 2003, p.8).

Rational choice theory (RCT) postulates that people will make choices between alternative ends given the means (resources) that they have (Arrow, 1951; Becker,

[38] As well as in an updated edition "Feminist Economics Today: Beyond Economic Man" (Ferber and Nelson, 2003). See also "If women counted" (Waring, 1990).

1974); or to put it another way, based on price and endowment, as well as what will make them happy – this is known as 'individual utility'. Feminist economists have criticised the ways that 'choice' in RCT is modelled as though individuals behave in selfish and separatist ways [39](England, 1993; Nelson, 1993; Folbre and Hartmann, 1988). Attempts made within New Household Economics (a sub-section of neo-classical economics) to model the ways that choices are made within the home using 'joint utility' (Becker, 1974), have also been criticised for creating an artificial dichotomy between:

> public-private sphere, market and household, economic and non-economic, self-interested and altruistic, male and female (Folbre and Hartmann, 1988, p.185).

England (1993; see also Woolley, 1993; Bergmann, 1995) argues from a feminist economics perspective that 'joint utility' – which posits that individuals act in their own (selfish) interests or in separatist ways in the market, is flawed. She argues that this suggests that individuals do not make altruistic decisions based on the needs of others as well as themselves. Nelson (1993) contends that RCT incorrectly assumes that individuals are "detached from the material world or persons" (1993, p.26; see also England, 1993) which fails to capture "humans in relation to their world" (ibid., p.32.) and what is important to them. An alternative view proposes that individuals make choices based on selfish needs, in addition to making altruistic choices based on their connection to others.

Although RCT takes account of 'individual 'preferences'[40] (or tastes), they are modelled as though they were fixed and unchanging (exogenous), which has been contested on the basis that this treats tastes as if they were "impervious to economic or social

[39] England also contests Becker's (1987) view of the 'male headed altruist' in the family who can behave in separatist ways in the market-place, but is altruistic (connected) within the family.
[40] 'Individual preferences' are included as an input within economic models which describes the amount of individual utility provided by different combinations of goods, services, working conditions, leisure, and children.

factors" (England, 1993, p.37; see also Elster, 1983; Sen, 1985, 1999). England (1993) problematises exogeneity of taste, arguing that it would require a "misleading degree of emotional separation and atomisation" (p.44) from one's social world. Rather, she postulates that social interactions (e.g., with co-workers), and even choice of spouse (or partner) influences tastes. Furthermore, she contends that models which ignore the endogeneity of taste "obscures some of the processes through which gender inequality is perpetuated" (ibid., p.44). An example of this would be through childhood socialisation whereby subsequent occupational choices would "perpetuate women's lower earnings" (ibid., p.44).

Elster (1983) makes a similar point that preferences are endogenous, or what he terms 'adapted preferences'. In his book "Sour Grapes", he argues that they are usually adjusted downwards in response to negative outcomes. However, the notion of 'adapted preferences' has been problematised because of their failure to take account of the complexity of human life (Nussbaum, 2000), as well as making it impossible to judge whether the change is a result of injustices and inequalities (Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 2000). On the first point, Nussbaum (2000) argues that individuals could learn to adapt their preferences as a result of adverse social conditions which they have internalised as "habit, fear, low expectations and unjust background conditions" (2000, p.114). On the second point, Sen (1985) holds that in unequal and patriarchal societies, 'adapted preference' theories have the potential to obscure substantive inequalities. He argues that this is especially relevant to those whose preferences are biased towards the needs of others, and consequently have a distorted view of their own self-interest.

So far, I have discussed the theories and debates on aspirations, choice and preferences. Although aspirations are the central focus of the thesis, it has been important to describe their relationship to economic thinking on theories of choice (plus the markets, altruism and self-interest). The neo-classical economic assumptions

on choice have attracted similar criticisms by feminists, feminist economists and development theorists, who reject their androcentric bias and point out how rational choice theories obscure the inequalities experienced by women in all aspects of their lives. Rather, they call for a broader view of economic life which takes account of women's lived experiences from their perspective and asks them about their choices and aspirations in ways that prioritise their voice. In what follows, I focus on Appadurai's theory on the 'capacity to aspire' (2004) and Ray's theory on the 'aspirations window' (2006). I outline the key critique of neo-classical economic choice theory here because 'rational choice theory' (RCT) forms the basis of, and intersects with other theoretical debates on 'choice' and 'aspirations', which I examine later.

Educational Aspirations: The deficit policy discourse

The literature on women learners' aspirations is scant, and yet in contrast, youth aspirations have been a dominant feature of educational policy discourse over the last two decades. This is reflected in the growth of research on educational aspirations across a broad range of contexts, both in the UK and internationally (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007; Fuller, 2009; Spohrer, 2011; Archer et al., 2013; Loots and Walker, 2015; Stahl, 2015; Gale and Parker, 2015; Zipin et al., 2015; Hart, 2016a; Spohrer et al., 2018; DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018; Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018; DeJaeghere, 2019; Mkwananzi and Cin, 2020). Most of this literature is focused on youth aspirations in HE and schools, and to a lesser extent, VET or FE. This literature can loosely be categorised in two ways: A critique of the policy discourse of aspirations, and empirical research which explores what individuals' aspirations are, and the ways in which educational aspirations may be theorised. These categories are not mutually exclusive, as some literature contributes to both areas. This sub-section will explore the policy discourse critiques here, and the empirical literature later.

‘Aspirations’ have negative associations within the dominant policy discourse. This is evident in the ways that youths in particular, are described in deficit terms such as having a ‘poverty’ or ‘lack of aspiration’, and as needing to ‘raise their aspirations’ if they wish to be successful (Hart, 2012, 2014; McGrath et al., 2020; Gale and Parker, 2015; Zipin et al., 2015; Spohrer et al., 2018; Archer et al., 2013). Sellar (2015) suggests that aspirations have become politicised against a backdrop of globalisation and knowledge capitalism, where governments may need to stimulate demand for education:

> Aspirations have emerged as a policy problem that may be addressed through interventions to ‘raise aspirations’ (2015, p.210).

He argues that while this shift places “individual aspiration’ at the heart of the social contract……it can also bring aspiration into the purview of governments as a problem for education policy” (ibid., p.210). However, scholars have criticised the dual aim of raising educational attainment alongside tackling social inequalities which are implicit within the aspirations discourse, because the structural factors and inequalities that affect learners are ignored (Archer et al, 2010; Hart, 2012, 2016; Zipin et al, 2015). The policy rhetoric individualises responsibility for structural disadvantage and as a consequence, young people’s goals and aspirations are not considered, nor are they addressed as ‘thoughtful actors’ (McGrath, Powell, Alla-Mensah, Hilal and Suart, 2020). Zipin et al. (2015) insist that disadvantaged individuals are given ‘opportunities’ based on “meritocratic ideologies which recognise that people need to have had the opportunity to succeed before they can be judged to have ‘failed’” (2015, p.229).

Spohrer and her colleagues (2018; see also 2011) contest the deficit model of aspirations discourse, claiming that their Foucauldian analysis of policy reveals a discourse of disadvantaged youths ‘having potential’ as well as being ‘in deficit’, which provides new insights into how the aspirations discourse functions (Spohrer et al, 2018). They draw on Cruikshank’s work (1999 cited in Spohrer et al., 2018) to argue that to some extent, the ‘aspirations discourse’ has been successful as it has trickled

down into the individual psyche where aspirations are internalised as being central to a ‘good life’ (ibid.; see also Zipin et al, 2015). They contend that this discursive approach to aspirations is a way of governing by enhancing the capacities of disadvantaged groups to help themselves (Spohrer et al, 2018, p.337). These “technologies of governance” have the explicit aim of helping young people to overcome their hardships in order to enable their “self-transformation” (ibid.).

Aspirations: Bringing the future back in

The broad and diverse theoretical and empirical contributions on educational aspirations have drawn on a range of theories. Some deploy sociological theories such as those of Bourdieu (1990; 1993; Fuller, 2009; Hart, 2012; Archer, DeWitt, Osborne, Dillon, Willis and Wong, 2013; Gale and Parker, 2015; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale, 2015; DeJaeghere, 2018), or Foucault (1978, 2000; cited in Spohrer, Stahl and Bowers-Brown, 2018; see also Spohrer et al, 2018) to frame aspirations. There is an emerging body of literature which draws on capabilities approaches to frame aspirations, either separately or in combination with sociological theories (Appadurai, 2004; Powell, 2014; Ibrahim, 2011; Hart, 2012, 2014; Conradie and Robeyns, 2013; DeJaeghere, 2018; Powell and McGrath, 2019 b; Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018, 2018b; Mkwanani and Cin, 2020). These contributions span different education and socio-economic contexts. In this section, I examine some of these empirical theoretical contributions and consider their potential application for my thesis.

In contrast to the dominant deficit policy discourse outlined earlier, capabilities approaches offer a ‘person centred’ and ethical epistemological and methodological framework which places individual aspirations at the heart of the enquiry (McGrath, 2012; McGrath and Powell, 2016). To varying degrees, the majority of this literature draws on Sen’s capabilities approach (1985, 1999; see also Nussbaum, 2012) as a socially just approach to evaluate what individuals have reason to value and how they go about achieving them. Aspirations tend to feature as a small part within a

contextually specific capabilities list in education research (McGrath et al, 2020), whereas in the literature where aspirations are the primary focus, they tend to draw on additional tools such as Appadurai's 'capacity to aspire' (CTA) (2004), as well as others (e.g., Bourdieu (1977) and Ray (2006)) to explore how aspirations are formed and enacted.

Appadurai's CTA has been used as a person centred conceptual tool for analysing an individuals' hopes, ambitions and motivations towards a future oriented goal or set of goals (DeJaeghere, 2018, 2019; Hart, 2012, 2016b; Ibrahim, 2011; Mkwananzi, 2019; Mkwananzi & Wilson-Strydom, 2018b, 2018a; Zipin et al., 2015). Furthermore, because the 'capacity to aspire' has a future oriented logic in that it focuses on opportunities being created that do not currently exist, it does not address the opportunities which are available to choose from in the present or one's ability to choose (Powell, 2012, p.646). To remedy this, Powell combines the CTA with Leßmann's 'capability to choose' (2009) which is concerned with the range of opportunities to choose from in the present and strengthening the ability to choose. Leßmann draws on Dewey's learning theories (1938; cited in Leßmann, 2009) (1938, cited Leßmann, 2009) to explain how an individual's ability to choose can be enhanced through education. Related to these points, the CTA does not explain how aspirations are formed and enacted in the present, which others (Hart, 2012, 2016; Walker, 2017; Mkwananzi, 2018, 2019) have responded to using Ray's (2003, 2006) concepts on aspirations which I outline next.

In some aspirations studies, the CTA has been combined with Bourdieusian theories (Gale and Parker, 2015; Hart, 2012; 2014; DeJaeghere, 2018, 2019; Zipin et al., 2015), and in others, it has been combined with a capabilities approach and Ray's 'aspirations window' (Mkwananzi, 2019; Loots and Walker, 2015). For example, Zipin et al., (2015) propose that Bourdieu's concepts of 'doxa' and 'habitus' (1977; 1992) can be used alongside the CTA to explain the complexity of aspirations and the ways that they change over time. In their theoretical paper, Zipin et al., (2005) suggest that Bourdieu's

concepts can be used to describe the aspirations which seem to be common sense which they term ‘doxic aspirations’, and those based on the latent embodiment of “what is possible for a person like me to do” which are termed ‘habituated aspirations’ (ibid., 234). However, they contend that Bourdieu’s concepts lack the potential to explain emergent aspirations, suggesting that Appadurai’s CTA is a lens which is capable of framing the ability to imagine their future world – or as they put it, their “social-present-becoming-futures” (ibid., p.236).

In their analysis of aspirations with HE students in Australia, Gale and Parker (2015) make similar points and recommend ‘corrections’ to Bourdieu’s social theory as it is “‘too formal and static’ (structuralist) to explain how student aspirations are formed” (2015, p.82). These ‘corrections’ and ‘additions’ involve using Appadurai’s ‘capacity to aspire’ (2004), to “bring the future back in” and theorise it as a ‘navigational capacity’. However, they contend that Appadurai’s account alone pays too much attention to agency and that Bourdieu is needed to “tackle structure rather than skirt around it” (Gale and Parker, 2015, pp.92-93). They also draw upon de Certeau’s spatial theories of ‘tour knowledge’ and ‘map knowledge’ (1984, p.119) to explain the differences in learners’ ‘navigational capacity’, which depend on the resources or ‘knowledge’ that they have of the best route to take to achieve their aspirations from the outset. They suggest that those who have ‘tour knowledge’ know the route needed to achieve their aspirations, but only as a result of instruction or coaching from a teacher/institution. Those with ‘map knowledge’ have a clear idea of the route towards their aspirations from the outset and are able to navigate any changes with ease.

Other empirical literature has blended concepts from Sen, Appadurai and Bourdieu (Hart, 2012, 2016; DeJaeghere, 2018, 2019), and more recently Ray’s ‘aspirations window’ (Mkwananzi, 2019; Mkwananzi & Wilson-Strydom, 2018c; Walker, 2018; Walker & Fongwa, 2017) to explore the dynamic, future oriented, socially situated and contextual nature of aspirations. Hart (2016) describes aspirations as:

> Future-oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations and they are indicative of an individual or group's commitments towards a particular trajectory or end point. (Hart, 2016, p.326).

This definition emphasises the possibility that aspirations may be unconscious and suggests that aspirations may be in the interests of others as well as the individuals themselves. In her study of youth aspirations, Hart fuses Sen's CA with Bourdieu's Habitus in a complex framework which also refers to the CTA, to argue that aspirations are dynamic, future orientated and multidimensional, as well as being formed and enacted in the thick of social life (2012; 2016). She focuses on individual aspirations and the choices made — specifically the ways that individuals express their aspirations, which she contends may not be their only aspirations or their "true aspirations" (Hart, 2012, p.84). She uses typologies of aspirations to differentiate between 'true' (revealed) aspirations – which are those aspirations which students independently reached "on their own volition" (ibid., p.84) and shared with others, from 'other' aspirations — which are guided by others (apparent), imposed on by others (adapted) or not shared with others (concealed). She contends that those who have 'true' (revealed) aspirations, had a greater degree of agency than those who shared their aspirations with others. Hart's version of aspiration typologies has been criticised by DeJaeghere (2018), who claims that it "does not necessarily show how the choices young people make toward their aspirations reflect a dynamic or even generative habitus" (2018, p.240), insisting that "aspirations and agency create an ongoing dialectic between structures that constrain and potential openings" (2016, p.12). Rather, she contends that Gale and Parker's (2015) conceptualisation of aspirations more closely reflects Appadurai's future and spatial orientation, which gives a more dynamic picture of the ways that individuals use their 'navigational capacity' which takes account of agency and the conditions around them.

The 'capacity to aspire' has been employed to support a gender sensitive methodological approach of women's aspirations in tandem with other theories (e.g.,

social and development theories), which strengthens the analysis of the complex ways that power and structures work to constrain agency (Ibrahim, 2011; Conradie, 2013; Conradie and Robeyns; 2013; DeJaeghere, 2018; Walker, 2017; Mkwananzi, 2019). For example, in Ibrahim's (2011) study, poor women in Egypt were encouraged to share their aspirations as part of an educational action research project. Her study revealed how the women's 'capacity to aspire' had been constrained throughout their lives by issues such as low attainment, poverty, and parental expectations, which were then compounded in adult life by household responsibilities and working patterns (2015, p.15). Similarly, in another action research project with women in Khayelitsha (near Cape Town), Conradie (2013; see also Conradie and Robeyns, 2013) investigated whether working with women to encourage them to voice their aspirations would increase their capabilities. The women were encouraged to reflect on their aspirations at the start of the project and to consider how these had developed towards the end of the project, which could be summed up as them wanting to be financially independent and personally autonomous (Conradie and Robeyns, 2013, p.570). In addition to having their own aspirations, they shared their desire to help others and the community. Their findings suggest that with education and support, the 'capacity to aspire' can be nurtured; they claim that this has an agency unlocking role.

In DeJaeghere's (2018) longitudinal empirical study on the educational aspirations of young women on VET courses in Tanzania, she defines aspirations as the "process of hoping and imagining, with others, about their future lives" (2018, p.239). Like Hart, she draws on Sen's CA, Bourdieu's habitus and fields, as well as the CTA to conceptualise the relationship between aspirations and agency. DeJaeghere uses a conceptual model to explain the dialectic relationship between aspirations and agency, which are affected by the social, economic and cultural conditions of young women's lives, as well as reflecting the gendered constraints familiar to other contexts (e.g., labour market segregation, gender norms, and participation in education). DeJaeghere recognises that the changing aspirations of the young women in her study would be

considered 'adapted preferences' (Sen, 1999) or 'adapted aspirations' (Hart, 2012) from a capabilities perspective. However, she argues that conceptualizing aspirations as dynamic, future orientated and emergent, situates them as "dialectically related to agency, in which action to use and apply knowledge and skills fosters reconsideration of aspirations within horizons of agentic action" (DeJaeghere, 2018, p.251). Furthermore, she emphasises how these women developed agency as they navigated the gendered norms and constraints. DeJaeghere's point that agency and educational aspirations are shaped by gendered constraints, is worthy of further exploration (Suart, 2019, p.6).

A few studies have drawn on the metaphor of the 'aspirations window' coined by Ray (2006), to explore how the CTA and aspirations are shaped by the exposure to possible futures within their social world (Walker and Fongwa, 2017; Walker, 2018; Mkwananzi, 2019). Mkwananzi (2019; see also Mkwanazi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018) uses Ray's concept of the 'aspirations window' (2003; 2006; see also Ray and Genicot, 2017) which expands on the CTA to explain the influence that the immediate social world can have on the formation and enactment of aspirations. Mkwananzi, like Hart (2012), uses typologies of aspirations. However, they offer a more complex exploration of the ways that aspirations, agency and social conditions intersect for marginalised and disadvantaged youths. Ray's aspirations window is described in metaphorical terms, but Mkwananzi adapts it to show four panes which are used to explain the extent to which agency and structures influence individuals' aspirations; she categorises them as resigned, powerful, persistent or frustrated aspirations. Even though Mkwananzi's version still uses 'typologies' to categorise aspirations, however, it does so in a way which responds to DeJaeghere's critique by focusing on the complex interplay between aspirations, agency and structures. Furthermore, her use of the 'aspirations window' along with the 'aspirations gap' metaphor, aids our understanding of the social influences on individual aspirations in specific contexts which are lacking in the CTA.

This sub-section has focused on aspirations while acknowledging that choice, preferences and aspirations are used interchangeably in the literature, and have been understood from a range of perspectives. I have noted the important influence that choice theories have had on the dominant discourse of education and in the theorisation of educational aspirations. In particular, I outlined the feminist economics critique of 'rational choice theory' which charges it with failing to acknowledge the ways that power and agency work in the distribution of resources, which ultimately affect choices, and especially the 'gendered constraints on choice'. Although the literature on the 'aspirations' discourse is focused on youths, it identifies the ways in which aspirations have been constructed within policy discourse as being in deficit, and the ways in which this fails to consider the perspectives of individuals and what is important to them. Finally, the alternative theoretical and empirical literature which takes a person-centred approach, draws on a variety of conceptual tools to understand the ways that aspirations are shaped by agency and structures, as well as being dynamic and emergent. Gendered constraints on aspirations are identified within this literature, but their diverse and different contexts highlight the need for a theory which frame the constraints on women learners' aspirations in this thesis. While theories on aspirations, choice and feminist economics might seem rather eclectic, they intersect in important ways which help us to consider not only how women learners' aspirations are formed and enacted, but under what conditions and life experiences.

Conclusions

This literature review has noted the paucity of empirical research on women learners in the English FE sector, and on their aspirations in particular. Although early research in the FE sector examined the relationship between gender, class and opportunities, it mostly focused on youth opportunities. There is a rich biographical literature on women learners' experiences across a range of contexts, some of this literature hints that aspirations are influenced by the social world, but because aspirations are not the central focus there is a lack of specific attention given to the ways that they are formed and enacted. The aim of the final section 'towards a new theory' was to prepare for the next chapter, I considered the potential of feminist economics for examining the ways that women learners' aspirations are shaped by social and economic factors; and how some of the theoretical concepts in the emerging aspirations literature support an analysis of the ways that aspirations are formed and enacted.

Chapter Three – Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In the literature review, I argued that there was a paucity of research on women learners in the FE sector, and even less about the nature of their aspirations. The final section examined the potential of bringing together theories from the aspirations and feminist economics literature[41] which shares complementary and interlocking views on issues of choice, aspirations, agency and structural constraints. In what follows, I illustrate how some of the theoretical concepts from each of these disciplines will be combined to frame the analysis in the empirical chapters.

The emerging body of literature on educational aspirations focuses on the perspectives of learners, drawing on theories from the human development traditions (as well as development economics and sociological traditions) to propose that aspirations are emergent and dynamically formed and enacted within the social context (Hart, 2012; Zipin et al., 2015; Walker and Fongwa, 2017; DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018; Walker, 2018). While agency is emphasised within theoretical concepts such as the 'Capacity to Aspire', other theories have been utilised to strengthen the account of the ways that aspirations are shaped by structures.

The diversity[42] of women learners who participated in this study and the complex factors which shaped their life choices and aspirations for their lives, requires theoretical tools which complement aspirations theory. I argue that feminist economics theories bring into sharp relief the constraints of work, care responsibilities,

[41] For example, the most cited articles in the Journal of Feminist Economics have been authored by development theorists (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 2004; Agarwal, 1997; Robeyns, 2003).
[42] In terms of the ways that class, race, sexual orientation, marital status and ethnicity intersected.

gender norms, money, time and migration rules that shaped and constrained the educational aspirations of the women learners in this study in different ways.

The first section examines the potential of two key concepts within the aspirations literature – the 'capacity to aspire' and 'the aspirations window', for understanding how aspirations are formed. The second section presents the conceptual tools on how 'Structures of Constraint' affect choice, as well as the ways that women show agency as part of a process of 'bargaining' and how they gain a 'sense of agency' as they pursue their aspirations. The final section describes how the theoretical tools were deployed in the analysis of the findings (chapters 5 and 6).

Aspirations

The Capacity to Aspire

Appadurai (2004) conceptualised the 'capacity to aspire' (henceforth CTA) in the context of poverty and development, but it has influenced a broad range of educational aspirations literature. The CTA has predominantly been used as part of a theoretical toolkit in a small and emerging literature in various VET contexts (Powell, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2015; Zipin et al., 2015; Hilal and McGrath, 2016; McGrath et al., 2020) and HE contexts (Hart, 2012; Calitz, 2015; Ongera, 2016; Walker and Fongwa, 2017; Walker, 2018); and to a lesser extent, as a methodological intervention to support learners' 'Capacity to Aspire' (Ibrahim, 2011; Conradie, 2013). A discussion on the CTA will be provided next, but it is worth pausing to note here that its growing popularity reflects the important contribution it makes to understanding aspirations as 'future tending impulses', and how these are shaped by issues of poverty and intersecting inequalities (Zipin et al., 2015, p.238) . Next, I consider Appadurai's key ideas, before critically examining how they have been deployed within the literature.

Appadurai (2004) exemplifies the ‘Capacity to Aspire’ (CTA) in his essay using the plight of the slumshack dwellers and how they collectively developed a capacity to aspire as a cultural capacity. Essentially, Appadurai challenges us to question the cultural conditions which shape individuals’ aspirations and the extent to which they can work towards them. He is responding to Sen’s (2004) “invitation to anthropology to widen its conceptions of how human beings engage in their own futures” (2004, p.63), insisting that people must be able to ‘voice’ what is important to them. He stresses that the ‘capacity to aspire’ is a cultural capacity which:

> [I]s not evenly distributed in any society. It is a sort of metacapacity and the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire…. It means that the better off you are (in terms of power, dignity, and material resources), the more likely you are to be conscious of the links between the more and less immediate objections of aspiration. (Appadurai, 2004, p.68).

He holds that inequalities are perpetuated through societies because the most privileged in society have what he terms ‘the navigational capacity’ or “the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically” (2004, p.69). Appadurai argues that the privileged have access to complex and varied experiences which places them in a better position to explore and try out a range of possibilities, as well as having the resources to access immediate opportunities. Moreover, their experiences of the ‘good life’ mean that they are “better able to express their aspirations in concrete ways”, as well as “the justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways”, and are more agile in “navigating the complex steps between these norms and specific wants and wishes” (ibid., p.68). In contrast, he argues that whilst the less ‘well-off’ in society do “express horizons in choices made and choices voiced”, he claims that they tend to be “bundles of idiosyncratic wants”, [which] “are inevitably tied up with more general norms” (ibid.). According to Appadurai, these factors accompanied by a lack of opportunity mean that the less ‘well-off’ have a more “brittle horizon of aspirations” (ibid., p.69).

There are several important features of the CTA that Appadurai insists upon which I summarise next, before offering a critical examination of how they have been framed in other educational research, followed by a discussion of how they will be deployed in the analysis of this thesis. Firstly, Appadurai argues that the CTA is a cultural capacity, which if strengthened, enables the poor (or disadvantaged[43]) to navigate an improved future, claiming that:

> Most approaches to culture do not ignore the future. But they smuggle it in indirectly when they speak of norms, beliefs, and values being central to cultures. But by not elaborating the implications of norms for futurity as a cultural capacity, these definitions tend to allow the sense of culture as pastness to dominate. (ibid., pp.60-61).

He claims that his views on aspirations add a 'cultural' dimension to Sen's capabilities approach[44]. He sees the CTA as a 'metacapacity' that accelerates other capabilities (ibid., p.68). While the central focus of this concept is on the 'collective capacity', it has also been translated as an 'individual capacity' (Hart, 2012). Secondly, the CTA is not concerned with what an individuals' aspirations are, rather, Appadurai invites us to question whether an individual has the CTA or not. Thirdly, he argues that to answer this question, the disadvantaged who often lack 'voice', need to be encouraged to express their interests and to be heard. Fourthly, and probably the most widely used metaphor associated with the CTA, is that one is able to 'map out' or imagine one's own future from a range of possibilities and be able to navigate the route towards their aspirations. Finally, he views education as being central to nurturing the CTA and supporting disadvantaged people to both 'navigate the route map' towards their goals and express their 'voice'.

[43] Appadurai uses poverty, development and the poor in the CTA examples within his essay. I use the term 'disadvantaged' to flag up the intersecting inequalities (e.g., race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, marital status and sexual orientation) experienced by the women in this thesis.
[44] Capabilities approach – what the values and goals of an individual are and how they go about achieving them.

Through the Aspirations Window

Economist Debraj Ray's expansion of Appadurai's CTA offers a helpful way of conceptualising how aspirations are formed and enacted (2006; see also Genicot and Ray, 2017). He acknowledges the socially situated nature of aspirations and contends that aspirations are multidimensional and are formed and enacted through an 'aspiration window' and within an 'aspiration gap'. The 'aspirations window' (AW) is:

> Formed from an individual's cognitive world, her zone of 'similar', 'attainable' individuals. Our individual draws her aspirations from the lives, achievements, or ideals of those who exist in her aspiration window. (Ray, 2006, pp.1-2).

This metaphor relates well to how adult women returners determine their aspirations using information from their networks and peers; for example, they might learn about a course at their local college from their friends, or in one case, through charitable well-being agencies. Here, the AW is the view of the educational landscape which is open to them. This is pertinent to women learners where educational routes and opportunities may be concealed from view, not communicated fully or revealed to them in stages. Again, this must always be thought of in relation to the social world and that 'similarity' to peers is always contextual, therefore "the greater the extent of perceived mobility, the broader the aspirations window" (Ray, 2003, p.3).

The 'aspirations window' resonates with Hodkinson and Sparkes' similar metaphor 'Horizons for Action', which explains how young people make what they call "pragmatically rational" choices on their careers based on their standpoint (including habitus) and the educational and labour market opportunity structures (1997, p.36). Both Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and Ray (2003; 2006) consider the influence that an individuals' social world and the structural constraints have on their aspirations (or choices), and yet their emphases differ in important ways; where Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) 'horizons' focus on a narrow, segmented labour market, Ray's (2003;

2006) ‘aspirations gap’ (AG) offers a nuanced explanation of how multidimensional[45] and dynamic aspirations are formed and enacted.

The ‘aspirations gap’ can be thought of “as the difference between the standard of living that is aspired to and the standard of living that one already has” (Ray, 2003. P.3); the ‘gap’ then is what stimulates “’future-oriented behaviour’ towards achieving one’s aspirations” (ibid., p.3). Ray notes that an economist would postulate that individuals would use the gap to reflect on whether the investment would lead to desired outcomes. Linking back to an important point Ray raises about the AW, he warns that ambitious aspirations or using his analogy of a “window that is open too wide” (2006, p.5), may lead to frustrated aspirations or what Appadurai calls “brittle horizons” (2004, p.69). This analogy is helpful for thinking about “the map of aspirations” that Appadurai (2004, p.69) talks about, whereby one sees the view and has some idea of how to get there. Following DeJaeghere (2018), I do not see this as a fixed window where one looks out and sees a certain route from A to B, or takes a fixed route road map; rather, I see it as dynamic, like the view from a window is ever-changing depending on the season, the weather and the landscapes one is exposed to. Aspirations can be regarded as dynamic and emergent; as individuals gain agency and mix with others, there is a potential for new horizons to open up as they see the potential to go to a different window or look at a different landscape. As Ray helpfully points out, “aspirations themselves will slide forward as well, as newer horizons come into view” (2003, p.4), suggesting that they are dynamic and not static, as well as being socially situated.

Framing Women Learners’ Aspirations

I hold the view that individual aspirations are multidimensional, dynamic and future-orientated (Conradie and Robeyns, 2013). For these “future tending impulses” (Zipin et

[45] Multifaceted aspirations – “Individuals aspire to a better material standard of living, but there are other aspirations as well … E.g., dignity, good health, recognition, political power” (Ray, 2003, p.2).

al, 2015, p.242) to result in achieved aspirations, individuals need the ability to read "a map of a journey into the future" (Appadurai, 2004, p.76). Although aspirations can be seen as future-oriented, they are constructed in relation to life histories and biographies – where past and present experiences influence aspiration forming. Hart (2012; 2016) has explained educational aspirations using typologies in response to the deficit model of aspiration discourse of youths. She categorises youth aspirations on the UK's 'Aim Higher' programmes as 'true and adapted' (Hart, 2012, p.86) and 'high or low' (2016, p.326) which I find problematic. Firstly, the deficit charge made against the aspirations discourse in the UK has been disputed in Spohrer's et al's (2018) most recent critical discourse analysis, which claims that there is evidence of youths "having potential" as well as having low aspirations (Spohrer et al., 2018, p.328). Secondly, binary categories do not examine how power functions (Gale and Parker, 2015). Rather, from a feminist perspective I agree with DeJaeghere's (2018) critique that aspirations should not and cannot be explained using fixed typologies; instead, they must be conceived of as dialectically in relation to agency and changing dynamically over time (DeJaeghere, 2018, p.12). They are best described as being emergent and fluid, and in response to complex and multidimensional factors that shape (women's) lives (DeJaeghere, 2018).

Aspirations are constructed and reconstructed within the thick of the social world, where the impact of individuals' aspirations on others (e.g., their children) is also taken into account (Dejaeghere, 2018). Thus, even though aspirations might be conceived of individually, they are mediated within their immediate social world. As I outlined previously, aspirations have a temporal nature, where they are always constructed in relation to past and present experiences.

Learners' initial aspirations rely on them being able to voice them honestly and to critically reflect on how they arrived at this point. Conradie and Robeyns (2013) warn us of the inherent problems with taking individuals' voices about their aspirations as a

given. They acknowledge the potential for what Elster (1983) termed 'adapting preferences', whereby one's aspirations are "adapted to adverse circumstances" (Conradie and Robeyns, 2013 p.565). They explain that in contrast, "a person can also have overambitious[46] aspirations, implying that she [sic] aspires to a life that is extremely unlikely to happen" (ibid., p.566). Relating this back to aspirations, I have followed their advice of not "uncritically register[ing] the aspirations that people voice and leave it there" (ibid.). The women learners in this study were facilitated to some extent, to critically reflect on their life history and their aspirations as they considered how they had got here. In encouraging women to think about their lives, women voiced their aspirations and discussed how they had adapted their aspirations to match their social circumstances. In follow up interviews, women spoke about how critically reflecting on their aspirations and what they had reason to value, had in many cases helped them to change their aspirations. This relates to Ray's 'aspiration window' (2006) where education and critical self-reflection combine to expand aspirations.

The structures of constraint (and gender)

Nancy Folbre (1994), acknowledges the critiques made by her fellow feminist economists on 'choice'[47] and offers an alternative feminist framework that attends to constraints on choices. Firstly, she argues that the polarity between 'choice' (in neo-classical economics) and 'constraint' (in Marxism economics) can be usefully exploited within a framework in conjunction with theories on 'co-operation and conflict', where 'power and agency' can be explored. Secondly, she identifies inequality blind spots within socialist feminist theories which foreground the structures of 'capitalism' and

[46] They acknowledge that caution needs to be deployed when using the term 'overambitious' too lightly, as it may be used to limit people's aspirations to change their lives (Conradie and Robeyns, 2013, p.566).
[47] Although this seems like a conceptual shift from aspirations, there is a relationship between the two. While 'aspirations' focuses on the bigger picture, 'choice' can be defined as the decisions between one thing and another which might lead to that aspiration.

‘patriarchy’ (dual systems theory). She proposes that these two theories are interdependent and form the basis of what she calls a “systematic framework” on the “structures of constraint” (forthwith SoC) (Folbre, 1994, p.40). Although these theories are not intended to be hierarchical, the amendments Folbre makes to ‘dual systems theory’ should be viewed as being foundational to the SoC. Therefore, I briefly outline her arguments on structures, before examining her theorisation of constraints.

Folbre argues that “constraints define the realm of choice” (1994, p.54). She distances herself from the earlier feminist critiques of the ‘rational’ aspect of choice theory, suggesting that ‘purposeful choice’ is used as an alternative term for “us to ask how people define and pursue their desires” (ibid.). She identifies four categories of ‘constraints’ on ‘choice’; assets, rules, norms, and preferences, and argues these enable an analysis of “what people want and how they can go about getting what they want” (ibid.). She exploits the polarised views of neo-classical economists on choice (and the so-called rational self-interested utility maximising individual) with those of Marxian economists on constraints. She concludes that although ‘individuals are not perfectly rational utility maximisers’ they are ‘purposeful agents who make decisions to buy, sell or engage in social activities’ as well as being:

> Shaped by the social construction of individual preferences and cultural norms. Choice takes place within certain social structures, themselves the outcome of previous choices and structures. The ownership of the means of production, or, more broadly, the distribution of initial assets, is an important dimension of social structures. But political, cultural, and psychological factors also define the groups to which individuals belong, and locate their position within them. (ibid., p.38).

In addition to these four structures of constraint, Folbre argues that we must be cognisant of the ways that power is asymmetrically distributed for some identity groups (e.g. by gender, age, sexual preference, nationality, race and class), so that the complexity and diversity of their experiences can be captured. She explains that the structures of constraint are based in, and interact with, gender, age, sexual preference,

nation, race and class[48]. Folbre acknowledges that constraints are not 'gendered' per se, however, she insists that there are significant gender differences in the distribution of wealth, cultural norms, and personal preferences. In contrast to Marxist feminist thought, she argues that SoC are:

> Not defined by what it governs, or the site where it exerts influence. It spans production and social reproduction, the market, the factory, the family, and the state. (ibid., p.59).

Rather, she draws on and reconceptualises the dual systems approach of 'socialist feminism' which intertwines the theoretical constructs of 'patriarchy'[49] and 'capitalism'[50] in a new way. Folbre claims that the term 'patriarchy' which is loosely defined as "ruled by men" has lost its relevance as "most societies over most of human history….[which] begins to make the term seem pretty empty" (ibid.). Similarly, she charges 'capitalism' with irrelevance and in need of revision as "most countries in the world are capitalist" and the "consequences of capitalism vary enormously among nations and are significantly affected by racial/ethnic divisions and class differences within countries" (ibid.). Moreover, she argues that while 'capitalism' and 'patriarchy' focus on class and gender, it:

> [D]oes not invite serious or sustained attention to inequalities that cannot be based in production, such as those based on nation, race, age, or sexual preference. These forms of difference often remain on a lower level of theoretical importance, even where they receive careful historical and political attention. Nationalism, racism, ageism, homophobia— these words all imply attitudes rather than structures. They do not comprise 'systems' comparable to capitalism or patriarchy. (Folbre, 1994, p.38).

Folbre proposes that 'patriarchy' could be better understood as structures of constraint based on age, gender and sexual preference, which are intertwined and

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[48] Disability could be added to this list also.

[49] Folbre defines capitalism as "combinations of structures of constraint based on nation, race and class in which private property and market exchange play an important role" (1994, p.60).

[50] Which Hartmann defines "as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women". (Hartmann, 2010, p.210).

independent. Similarly, she insists that ‘capitalism’ would be better understood as combinations of structures of constraint based on nation, race, and class. She is keen to point out that these reconceptualisations should be viewed as a way of “translating old technology into new, *not* [emphasis added] as a way of reproducing the traditional conceptual divide between production and social reproduction” (ibid., p.60). In what may appear to be a somewhat contradictory tone, Folbre urges us to avoid treating each of the SoC individually, arguing that they “co-exist with and co-influence each other” (ibid., p.59). Even though these ideas are now almost thirty years old, they are still relevant and indeed echo many of the concerns of intersectional feminist thinking. That is, while gender and class are significant structures of constraint, attention must be given to what Folbre calls other ‘attitudes’ (such as racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ageism and ableism), so that we can gain a full picture of how inequalities affect women in multidimensional ways. Having discussed the rationale behind Folbre’s SoC, I will now explain each SoC and suggest what they can contribute to this research.

Assets

According to Folbre (1994), women’s individual economic circumstances have a strong influence on the choices they can make (e.g., such as access to affordable childcare, time, and money), and ultimately, their ability to engage in education. Earlier, I rehearsed the feminist economic debates which highlight that despite progress towards gender equality, women still experience unequal access to leisure time and financial wellbeing – a situation compounded by maintaining the greatest responsibility for care. Folbre explains that ‘constraints’ are not intended to be hierarchical, however, she goes on to argue that without the most basic ‘assets of time and money, one cannot do or buy anything’ (1994, p.54). Assets of time and money are relevant to this study for several reasons. Firstly, women learners are likely to be

balancing their time between paid work with study and care responsibilities[51].
Secondly, they may need to pay for care in order to study and thirdly, they may be responsible for paying course fees for which they may take on the debt of an Adult Learning Loan. Fourthly, there may be financial consequences to the amount of paid work they can do, the types of work they can do and the impact of study/work/care on their welfare benefits, which ultimately affects their ability to pay for and engage in study. Also, there are implicit assumptions in the transferability of household incomes in some course fee waiver eligibility criteria. Although these potential constraints are listed separately, they are likely to interact with each other in complex ways. For example, women learners who balance care and study might have to pay for care and apply for a loan.

Rules

Folbre (1994) defines ‘rules’ as “the parameters of acceptable behaviour” which are usually specified in law by states or institutions which:

> Set limits on human transactions, condoning some types of violence and interdicting others. Rules situate individuals within social groups. Citizens can do X, non-citizens cannot. Men can do Y, women cannot. Heterosexuals can do, homosexuals cannot. Rules tell people who they are, what they can do, and how they will be punished and rewarded. (1994, pp.40-41).

The examples suggested about what ‘rules’ are and on what grounds they are enforced reflect the context (time and place) within which she is writing; even though some of these examples do not mirror those in England (e.g., those related to gender or sexuality), there are others concerning citizenship which are highly relevant to this thesis. Moreover, she argues that they influence the choices that individuals can make because:

> .. they specify the rewards to certain types of assets, the rights of citizenship, the freedom to seek work, the ability to move capital across

[51] Care responsibilities include childcare, care for the elderly or care for other vulnerable adults.

> national boundaries, the types of individual characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, or gender) that may be used as criteria for inclusion, exclusion, hiring, or firing. (ibid., p.41).

Although Folbre acknowledges the advancements made in the west towards 'equal opportunities', she argues that cultural norms and personal preferences "work to reinforce discriminatory patterns, even where explicit discrimination is prohibited by law" (ibid., p.63). In this thesis, rules are most likely to constrain women learners who have recently migrated; this depends on their migration status but they may be unable to access funded education, not have the 'right to work' or their qualifications from their country of origin may not be recognised/valid.

Norms

Folbre (1994) defines 'norms' as "implicit rules" (1994, p.41). She contends that unlike laws or rules, they are not "enforced by an external authority, such as a boss or a judge" but are a:

> more decentralized form of social authority, based on common agreements or understandings that are not necessarily unanimous, but nonetheless tend to restrain dissent. (ibid.).

With regards to social authority, she is referring to the ways that individuals connect with each other and how identities or expectations are understood, noting that these influences on cultural norms are heterogeneous and susceptible to change across time and space. Folbre avoids being specific about what these norms are, proposing that "norms connect individuals in ways that presume and enforce collective identity" (ibid.). While she is keen to point out that norms "impose a price on non-conformity" (ibid., p.54), she also acknowledges that:

> Cultural norms influence but do not determine individual preferences; otherwise, non-conformists would be inconceivable. Individuals do not choose the norms to which they are initially subject, but they may seek to modify and redefine them. Though continually tested and contested, norms are social 'habits' that resist change. (ibid., p.41).

The ambiguity of Folbre's definition of 'norms' has been criticised by Pearse and Connell (2016), who state the term is "vague and often ambiguous", and offer a more explicit and helpful definition of 'norms':

> "Norms" may refer to values, attitudes, preferences, conventions, assumptions, ideologies, traditions, customs, culture, rules, laws, beliefs, or even rights'. (Pearse and Connell, 2016, p.34)

They categorise these complex meanings as the cultural domain of human life, which "involve practices of interpretation, communication and meaning giving" (ibid., p.34). They stress that 'norms' are dynamic and prone to constant review and contestation, and suggest that the analysis of norms within bargaining theories (e.g., Kabeer, 1999; Agarwal, 1997) helps to foreground agency as well as structure. They point towards the "nuanced and fine-grained analysis" offered within bargaining theories which foreground agency as well as structure. In this thesis, 'norms' has a few guises; they shape the choices, aspirations and attitudes of women learners; they influence what they see as their role within the family, community and as an individual; in addition to their attitude towards the division of work and care; and importantly, they determine what can be bargained over.

Preferences

According to Folbre (1994), 'preferences' "describe what individuals like and how much" and they are "the dimensions of desire" (1994, p.42). In common with the adapted preference theorists[52], Folbre holds that the neo-classical economic view that preferences are static and unchanging (exogenous) is inaccurate. She argues that:

> It may seem odd, particularly to economists, to describe preferences as an aspect of social structures. But we do not choose to want everything we want; we inherit some of our desires. This does not imply that preferences are exogenously given and constant over time (as a traditional neoclassical approach would hold). Rather, they are partially

[52] Discussed earlier (e.g., Elster, 1983; Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 2000).

> endogenous, like assets, rules and norms. They all define individual positions at the beginning of a game called life, which may be changed in the course of that game. (1994, p.41).

That is, while some preferences (or tastes) might be inherited, they are not constant over time; rather, they define individual positions which may be changed in the course of life as they are moulded by ’social or cultural norms‘. Folbre describes ‘preferences’ as somewhat unconscious; that is, one does not think about them unless for example, they work consciously to think about what their preferences are (e.g. with a therapist or teacher), which she terms ‘meta-preferences’.

Folbre suggests that preferences are not specifically ‘gendered’ but explains how they work in tandem with norms in ways that can constrain choice (along with the other SoC) in gendered and (often unconscious) ways. She argues that this can be evident when desires conflict; for example, in this thesis, women learners may experience conflict between the desire to be present for one’s children and a desire to gain an education which means that they have less time to spend with them. Or to put it another way, they have educational aspirations they want to fulfil, but they are also constrained by cultural norms (e.g., being a good mother, wife etc). Cultural norms (as well as assets and rules) constrain choices in gendered (and often unconscious) ways. For Folbre, structures of constraint on choice are interlinked; that is, a woman learner who decides to become a nurse, will also need to have sufficient assets (time, money), be able to study (migrant status[53]), and require for it to be culturally acceptable (gender norms) for her to do so. The definition of preferences advanced by Folbre is somewhat narrower in scope than those of Appadurai (2004) and Ray (2006), who suggest that they can also be enhanced or restricted depending on whom you are influenced by and what you think you can achieve.

[53] Migrant status – there are different rules related to work and study visas, as well as rights to remain.

Agency, bargaining and cooperative conflict

Agency

The previous section examined the structures which constrain choice (and aspirations), in addition to signalling the complex inequalities on which they are based. Even though Folbre (writing as a feminist economist) recognises the potential to resist these SoC through individual bargaining (or collective action), she offers little discussion on agency. Agency has been understood as being free to pursue whatever goals individuals have reason to value (Sen, 1985; 1999), or the "ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999, p.438). Kabeer problematises these silences about women's agency, claiming that because "agency operationalises the concept of choice" (2008, p.20), it is essential to understand how they work.

Kabeer (1985, 1999a, 1999b, 2008) frames agency in relation to power, and she expresses these in her concepts the 'power within'[54], 'power to', 'power with' and 'power over'. Briefly, she describes the 'power to' as being able to define and work towards one's own goals, 'power with' as supporting others to develop the 'power to', and the 'power within' as an internal feeling or 'sense of agency' (SoA), claiming that both reflect 'positive agency'. In contrast, she uses 'power over' to describe the lack of freedom an individual has to pursue their interests because of inequality and coercion, or what she determines 'negative agency'. Kabeer's views on how agency might be observed[55] during individual negotiations (through resistance, subversion, bargaining and conflict), resonates with Folbre's (1994) discussion on how bargaining takes place — a point I return to later in this section. However, it is Kabeer's explanation of 'Sense of Agency' which offers a novel addition to SoC and bargaining theories. She describes agency as:

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[54] Kabeer uses 'power within' and 'Sense of Agency' (SoA) interchangeably.
[55] Individually as the 'power to' or 'power over'.

> The capacity to define one's goals and act on them. It goes beyond the observable behaviour to encompass the meaning, motivations, skills and purpose that people bring to their action, "their sense of agency."(Kabeer, 2008, p.20).

According to Kabeer, a 'Sense of Agency[56]' (SoA) is the "cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" that individuals engage in which give them a sense that they can achieve something (1999, p.3). Essentially, what Kabeer is referring to as a SoA or 'power within', might be thought of as a feeling which supports the expansion of agency (Rowlands, 1997), or:

> Changes in consciousness… including their sense of self-worth and social identity, their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives, and to renegotiate their relationships with others.
> (Gammage, Kabeer and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2016, p.5).

Despite its vagueness, SoA is a useful concept because it helps to explain how women learners become aware of and reflect upon some of the SoC that they have had to negotiate in order to work towards their aspirations, as well as what they are capable of. Thus far, I have briefly outlined the way that agency can be understood, and in particular the value in thinking about the aspects of agency (SoA) that cannot be seen. In what follows, I discuss some of the theories on bargaining processes and suggest how they have been deployed in this thesis.

Bargaining and cooperative conflict

According to Folbre (1994), the structures of constraint (SoC) work together to shape the potential "for cooperation and conflict"[57] (ibid., p.53), or more specifically, assets, norms and preferences form the basis of what is bargained over in the household unit. To put this another way, 'bargaining' is essentially the extent to which individuals have

[56] Kabeer also refers to Sense of Agency (SoA) as the power within.
[57] '*Cooperation'* can be defined as being in mutual agreement with others or working together towards goals and *conflict* is defined as contestation and disagreement.

agency to challenge and contest against anything which prevents them from doing what is important to them. At the same time, it is important to note that women are likely to have different perceptions of their own interests (Sen, 1985; Agarwal, 1997). In the context of this thesis, 'conflict' is best described as the ways and extent to which women are prepared to challenge the status quo so that they can pursue their aspirations or what economists refer to as' self-interest'. Conversely, cooperation reflects how women learners might narrow or reduce their aspirations to be altruistic in the home. Although cooperation and conflict are presented as binary positions, they combine in complex ways with the SoC which are based on interlocking identity categories (of race, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and class) which shape choice. Also, as I have argued elsewhere, because 'aspirations' (and choice) are dynamic, dialectic and situated within the social world, women learners may occupy contradictory positions about their preferences which reflects both individual and collective goals. Thus, women learners' preferences may diverge between 'self-interest' and 'altruism'; for example, they may want to be a 'good mother' (physically present) and also want time to themselves to pursue their educational aspirations (which means they may be less physically present).

As I outlined earlier, some bargaining theories have focused purely on the economic aspects which underpin decisions within couple households, and while feminist economists agree that assets are central, they insist that power, agency and norms also play a critical role in the bargaining process (Seiz, 1991; Bergmann, 1995; Woolley, 1996; Agarwal, 1997; Katz, 1997). In this thesis, it could reflect how and why women learners negotiate constraints on choices so that they can work towards their aspirations, or the ways that women gain agency as part of the process of cooperation and conflict. It is the everyday negotiations over issues related to assets (time and money) such as childcare, work, expenditure, leisure time, and domestic responsibilities which are shaped by norms and preferences. Although I will be focusing on bargaining within the household unit in this thesis, these complex

negotiations occur within other institutions too (e.g., in negotiating pay/work hours/conditions/flexibility etc). Furthermore, as Bergmann (1995) points out, ‘household units’ are more diverse and complex than suggested by economic models. Within this thesis, household units are defined as couple households with/without children as well as single parents (who negotiate with their children), dependant single adults with significant caring responsibilities for siblings or grandparents and intergenerational households.

Agarwal (1997) and Katz (1997) have focussed on the ways that agency affects ‘intra-household bargaining’ negotiations, either negatively or positively. More specifically, they have devised alternative models which account for the complexity absent in other models (Lundberg and Pollak, 1993; Lundberg and Rose, 2000). Though these complex quantitative models of ‘bargaining’ will not be fully deployed in this thesis, there are qualitative elements that are explored within the analysis. Firstly, Agarwal (1997) urges us to consider the ways that ‘norms’ shape who gets to challenge the ‘norms’ that go against their own self-interests (aspirations/choices) and on what basis, which is helpful. In particular, it supports the analysis at the individual level about how norms have shaped aspirations, what the implications of non-conformity are, and how women learners challenge ‘norms’ to pursue their own goals. Relatedly, how ‘voice’ (or decision making) is determined by social norms and rules are not always symmetrical within households (Katz, 1997). She acknowledges that ‘voice’ is problematic to analyse because:

> Some individuals are harder ‘bargainers’ than others………and some people internalize norms to such an extent that their very ability to perceive of their own interests as distinct from those of their household. (ibid., p.32).

However, she suggests that qualitative and interdisciplinary work can advance some of the empirical challenges of working with these concepts, and I would argue that detailed life history and biographical methods support this. Katz borrows the terms

‘voice’ and ‘exit’ from Hirschman (1970)[58] to describe how ‘voice’ is only one aspect of ‘agency’ in bargaining, the other is ‘exit’. ‘Exit’ “refers to the socially and economically constructed alternatives facing household members in the absence of a cooperative solution” (Carter and Katz 1997, cited in Katz 1997). She explains that, like ‘voice’, exit options are asymmetrical. This asymmetry is cross-cutting; firstly with regards to what access they have to an alternative fall-back plan (e.g. welfare, child support, a home), and secondly, that they have a good understanding of what their exit options are Katz (1997; see also Sen 1999) highlights how ‘norms’ influence this knowledge.

Even though the theoretical tools presented here may appear to be specific to economic negotiations within couple households, I would argue that to differing degrees and with different emphases, these reflect the experiences of women in their diverse household situations within this thesis. This was particularly evident in situations where ‘conflict’ led to women deciding to ‘exit’ unhappy situations and using that as an opportunity to pursue their own self-interest (aspirations). Also, for those who had less dramatic negotiations, bargaining still took place within their household before or during the course along the lines of care, work, expenditure, leisure time and family expectations.

[58] Hirschman (1970) uses these terms in a somewhat different context in his book (Hirschman, 1970).

Framing the Analysis

The Aspirations Model (figure 7) below is intended to provide a visual overview of the concepts that are used in the empirical chapters and will be used to structure this section.

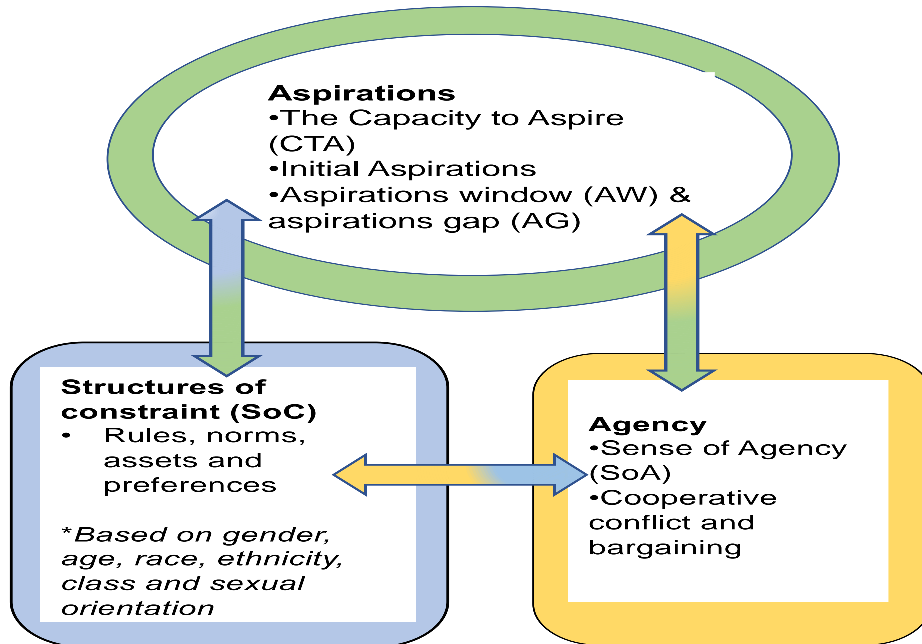

Figure 7: Aspirations model

It is important to note that although these concepts are outlined individually, they should be read as working in conjunction with each other. Aspirations are the central concept on the model which reflects the aims of the thesis, and you will note that it sits above structure and agency which both influence it in different ways. The dynamic arrows between aspirations and agency, structures and agency, and aspirations and

structures, suggest that they influence each other. This section aims to bring together the key concepts that were rehearsed in the previous two sections of this chapter and explain how they fit together using this model to support this. This section will be purposively brief and descriptive to aid clarity and avoid repetition. Aspirations model

Aspirations

The central focus of this thesis has been to understand why women learners return to FE and more specifically, what their aspirations are and how these are formed and enacted. Aspirations are constructed and enacted in the social world; they can be thought of as being dynamic and future tending in nature as well as being influenced by past and present experiences. While aspirations are formed individually, they are dialectic; that is, they can be formed and enacted for the benefit of others as well as oneself (e.g., increasing income for the family). The formation, enactment and achievement of aspirations are influenced by structural constraints and agency. It is worth pausing to clarify that aspirations might be defined as an 'end goal', and yet some of the literature which underpins the concepts on structure and agency focuses on the series of small steps and decisions individuals make along the way (choices and preferences). Therefore, although I will be using the term 'aspirations', these have been influenced by choice and preference theories.

Appadurai's 'Capacity to Aspire' (CTA) (2004) is used as an overarching concept which asks questions about the extent to which individual women learners, given their background, experiences and present circumstances, are able to form aspirations and plan the route map to achieving them. I have added the concept of initial aspirations because they help to focus on what learners' aspirations are at the outset so that they can be judged against the CTA. Ray's expansion of the CTA is used to explore how aspirations are formed and enacted through the 'Aspirations Window' (AW) and with the 'Aspirations gap' (AG) in mind (2003; 2006). To clarify, the AW is the view of what might be possible for a 'person like me to achieve' given the resources available.

According to Ray (2006), this view can be narrowed or broadened depending on their exposure to others who have expanded their aspirations. The AG is the distance between where one is now and what one aspires to achieve. He suggests that if the aspirations are too easy to achieve (or the distance too short), they may decide not to pursue them; alternatively, if they are perceived as being too difficult (the distance too great), then they may give up – what Appadurai calls "brittle horizons" (2004, p.69). The lack of attention to structure, and specifically concerning the ways that this influences the formation, enactment and achievement of aspirations are addressed next within the structures of constraint.

Structures of constraint (SoC)

Feminists and feminist economists have contributed a rich empirical and theoretical literature on the structures that shape women's lives, particularly those relating to work, pay, care, domestic responsibilities and agency. This literature avoids treating women as a homogenous group but acknowledges how gender is always mediated through other intersecting identity categories (such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and class). It emphasises how women can experience similar constraints despite the complexity and heterogeneity of their lives. Folbre's (1994) framework on women's choice and the four concepts which underpin the 'Structures of Constraint' (SoC) (assets, rules, norms and preferences) which are based on identity categories (such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, class and sexual orientation), have been used. The model shows a dynamic arrow between agency and structure and structure and aspirations, which indicates the possibility that bargaining (conflict and cooperation) may be used by women learners in order to pursue their aspirations, as well as gaining a 'sense of agency'. Both of these concepts are explored in the next sub-section on agency.

Agency and bargaining

Agency has been conceptualised in two ways: firstly, in its demonstrable form through conflict and cooperation and secondly, through the reflections learners have about how their sense of agency has altered over time. Folbre (1994), recognises that for individuals to pursue their own self- interest (aspirations), they may need to oppose the SoC in the form of 'household bargaining'. According to Agarwal (1997), the process of bargaining is affected by gender norms where it is conducted covertly or overtly; aggressively or quietly, or as Kabeer explains, using bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 438). In this thesis, the household has been defined as the unit in which they live (e.g., couple households, single-parent households, an adult child living with parents, intergenerational households, cohabiting couples) or if they live alone, those in their personal life who have the most significant influence over their ability to pursue their own interests (e.g., caring for adult siblings they no longer live with, etc). The concept of bargaining has been deployed to consider how and why women learners engage in cooperation and conflict over SoC (but especially assets, norms and preferences) in order to pursue their aspirations and goals. To clarify, bargaining should not be thought of as a 'one off' but a series of contestations by women learners as they form and enact their aspirations. The act of bargaining can be thought of as observable agency, and yet Kabeer (1999a, b; 2008) argues that agency is also an intrinsic feeling or 'Sense of Agency' (SoA) which she claims helps women to resist power.[59] SoA is used to explain the reflections women learners share about how the formation and pursuit of aspirations (as well as the bargaining) have contributed to changes in the ways they feel, for example feeling more empowered, having increased self-confidence and greater self-esteem.

[59] Kabeer refers to 'Sense of Agency (SoA)' and 'Power within' interchangeably. For clarity, going forward, I will use 'Sense of Agency (SoA)'.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed the key theoretical concepts which will be used to structure the findings and analysis chapters. The primary focus of this thesis is on women learners' aspirations, and as part of that, it asks the extent to which they have the 'Capacity to Aspire' and under what conditions. The aspirations conceptual tools outlined here facilitate a person-centred analysis of aspirations which takes account of their emergent, dynamic, and dialectic nature, as well as the ways these are influenced by their immediate social milieu. The lack of attention to structural constraints in these tools will be addressed by using Folbre's (1994) 'gendered structures of constraint on choice', as it highlights many of the influences (e.g., care, leisure time, money, migration rules, gender norms) which can shape and constrain women learners' educational aspirations. Despite these constraints, feminist economists remind us of how women's agency can be observed in the ways that they bargain for and negotiate with others as they resist constraints, so that they can pursue their own self-interest (aspirations), and the ways in which women gain a SoA as they work towards their own aspirations.

The discussions of this chapter provide the language and theoretical concepts for considering the overall research question which drives the rest of this thesis which is:

'What are the aspirations of adult women learners who participate in VET in the English Further Education Sector?'

This leads to the following sub-questions:

- What are the aspirations of women learners who return to FE?
- How do women learners form their aspirations?
- Do/how do women learners' aspirations change over time?
- What are the barriers to pursuing their aspirations and how do women learners navigate them?

Chapter Four - Research Methodology

Overview

The research question of this study is concerned with the aspirations and experiences of adult women learners who are undertaking VET/vocationally related courses in the FE sector. As I have explained elsewhere, women learners are the focus of the inquiry because they are a significant demographic within the FE sector and yet there is very little understood about why they return to study.

This chapter explores the ways that the research was designed and conducted, as well as the reasoning behind my decisions. The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I discuss why I adopted a feminist stance and how this shaped the research and the subsequent knowledge claims. The second section explains why I chose to use a qualitative methodological approach, the research design and the data collection phases. The complexity and diversity of the sample warranted an extended exposition which can be found in the third section. The final section critically explores the methods, ethical considerations and data analysis, before concluding with a discussion about the strengths and limitations of the study.

Feminist Standpoint

I selected a feminist epistemology as my research focused on women learners[60], and also because it was important to prioritise their voices which have been marginalised within FE policy and against a backdrop of austerity. My epistemology most closely aligns with that of 'standpoint feminist epistemologist/theorists' (Harding, 1987, 2014;

[60] Feminist research has been defined as research not just by women or on women, but with women (DeVault 1990, 1996; Edwards, 1990; Fonow and Cook, 1991, 2005; Neilsen, 1990; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1987, 1989, 1999; Stanley and Wise, 1983, 1993).

Smith, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 2002). I adopted a feminist standpoint (hereafter feminist SP) epistemology for this study for a number of reasons; firstly because it starts with the voices of women and views their experiences as critical to feminist research and theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987); secondly, supported by feminist theory, it aims to make visible the ways that power and knowledge shape what can be known about women's lives; thirdly, it views women's experience as socially situated and knowledge as partial and finally, it acknowledges the heterogeneity of women and their diverse experiences which are mediated through the intersection between gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, marital status and sexuality.

In taking this epistemological stance, I start with women learners' educational biographies - in which they share their individual and heterogeneous experiences of structural constraints and agency. At the same time, I privilege a feminist reading of the broad commonalities between their experiences and the structuring effects of patriarchy. This position aligns with the advice given by Ramazanoğlu and Holland (1999, 2012), about the need for feminist theory in order to make sense of experiences. They contend that:

> The feminist case that where social relations of gender are subordinating, then they should be transformed, rests on accounts of the experiences of the subordinated/subordinating, as well as the theory of subordination. The judgement of what should be changed is clearly political and ethical. To identify what should be transformed, we need appropriate theory: to produce appropriate theory we need knowledge of what is to be transformed, and so some sense of how subordination is experienced (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 1999, p.386).

Their insistence that feminist theory is needed to interpret experiences echoes a similar point by Hirschmann (1992) about the need for political theory:

> Thus, a feminist goal is not to "act out" women's experiences but to theorize them critically and to learn about women's responses to oppression as much as about the oppression itself. This is certainly consistent with my own use of standpoint. (Hirschmann, 1992, p.181).

Moreover, it responds to the charges made against earlier versions of feminist SP epistemology which privileged women's experience and their 'ways of knowing' (Longino, 1994; Hekman, 1996; Wylie, 2019). Feminist SP epistemology has been criticised for essentialising and homogenising 'gender' as a category by post-modern feminists (Flax, 1983; Butler, 1990). However, my view reflects the clarifications and revisions made by post-modern feminists which hold that gender is a social construct, and that women's experiences are shaped and structured in relation to that - albeit in heterogeneous ways (Harding, 1991, 2014). Similarly, I agree with Hirschmann (1992) that there is not a "feminine standpoint" which is "natural to all women" or a "single feminist standpoint" which represents all women; rather, there are "multiple standpoints" which reflect differences between women (in terms of class, ethnicity, race, sexuality) and their individual contexts (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991, 2009; Hirschmann, 1992, p. 167; Fricker, 2000; Stanley and Wise, 2002).

Harding (1991) holds that there are three main feminist epistemological positions which she categorises as feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and post-modern feminism[61]. These categories can be thought of as occupying positions on a continuum between 'absolute truth' (feminist empiricism) and 'absolute relativism' (post-modernist feminism), with feminist SP epistemology considered a 'mid-way position between the two'. I reject feminist empiricism because although it aims to make the androcentric bias and gender blindness of science visible, it is grounded in positivism and objective truths (cf. Keller, 2003; Longino, 1994). Similarly, I find post-modernist feminism's criticism of 'totalizing claims' about gender (Leavy, 2007) and

[61] According to Harding (2014), feminist empiricists were concerned with the androcentric bias in science and the lack of consideration of the ways that science might be blind to gender (Longino, 1994; Keller, 2003). Post-structural feminists argue that there is no 'grand narrative' or single reality, rather, there are multiple realities which can only be known through the discourse (Butler, 1990; Hekman, 1996).

the deconstruction of gender not only unhelpful but problematic. As Herbold (1995) incisively puts it, postmodernism and feminism appear to have ”antithetical objectives” (1995, p.85), which, I argue, has the potential to weaken the analysis of women learners’ lived realities.

Despite the differences between these epistemological positions, feminist research is “distinctive to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women’s experience” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2012, p.22; see also Code, 1995; Nelson, 1993). Qualitative feminist researchers share key concerns about and commit to meaningfully engage with issues of power, ethics, reflexivity, the politics of representation and researcher positionality (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002; McHugh, 2020), not just in the research design but throughout the research and beyond.

Power and Reflexivity

Power is a major concern for feminist research in the way that a research project is initiated and produced (Grenz, 2014). Essentially, I consider power to operate on three levels: firstly, in the ways in which there are hidden aspects of power (Harding, 1993) that constrain women’s aspirations which can be made visible within an approach that places their voices at the centre. Secondly, within the research relationship itself, and finally, in terms of representation – or who gets to speak for whom (Code, 1995) and how the voices of women “become transformed into theory” (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008, p.41).

Feminist SP epistemology prompts us to reflect on the “relations of power as a distinctive kind of obstacle to the production of scientific knowledge” (Rolin, 2009, p.219), and because it starts with the voices of the marginalised, it helps to overcome some of the problems of power by bringing women “from the margin to the centre” (hooks, 1984, p.ix). Despite the ways that feminist SP addresses power imbalances

between the researcher and the researched, it is important to acknowledge that the "final shift of power" is always weighted towards the researcher who determines what knowledge is shared (Cotterill, 1992, p.606; Reinharz, 1992). The tensions illustrated here serve to emphasise the crucial role of reflexivity within feminist research which urges feminist researchers to contemplate and be transparent about issues of power, representation and their positionality as a researcher (Fonow and Cook, 1991; Harding, 1991, 2009; DeVault, 1996; Naples, 2003; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2012).

In practice, I followed the advice given by feminist researchers on being reflexive at every stage of the research process. In particular, I reflected upon the power dimensions which could occur between myself as a researcher and the participants at each point – especially within the interviews (e.g. Edwards, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Skeggs, 1994, 2004; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Letherby, 2003; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). The interviews prompted me to reflect on how I would deal with the highly sensitive information some women shared with me (such as abuse, criminality, addiction and poverty), and the most appropriate way to interpret and represent culturally sensitive information as a white female researcher. Code (1995; see also Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008) warns feminist researchers of the potential dangers of speaking on behalf of others, contending that:

> Only rarely can we presume to understand exactly how it is for someone else even of our own class, race, sexual orientation and social group. These issues become exacerbated when feminists claim to speak for others across the complexities of difference, with the consequences that the politics of speaking for, about, and on behalf of other women is one of the most contested areas in present-day feminist activism and research. (Code, 1995, p.30)

I completely acknowledge the difficulties Code refers to above but would add that there are ethical considerations involved in excluding certain voices (Edwards, 1990). Therefore, I decided that it was important to include the voices of women who were multiply marginalised – not just with regards to race and ethnicity, but also in their

underrepresentation in FE policy and contemporary research. In order to mitigate the potential critique of speaking on behalf of others across intersectional differences (race, gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality), I encouraged participants to share their unique perspective, about how cultural and intersecting differences had shaped their educational aspirations and experiences.

Feminist research has been criticised for lacking objectivity in relation to 'positivist' methods and as such, it has been subject to greater scrutiny (Miller, 2017). Stanley and Wise (1993) reject positivist notions of 'objective truth' which is free from emotion, in their insistence that:

> …… being alive involves us in having emotions and involvements, and in doing research, we cannot leave behind what it is to be a person alive in the world. (ibid., p.161)

This point resonates with those made by others about the researcher being transparent about their role in the research and to consider the potential for the private and personal to become entwined – especially in narrative research (Parr, 1998; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Thus, for feminist researchers, emotions form an inevitable part of the research (Stanley and Wise, 2002; Letherby, 2003; Squire, Davis, Esin, Andrews, Harrison, Hyden and Hyden, 2014). Researchers have reflected on the emotional nature of research that involves sensitive subjects such as rape (Campbell, 2002); eating disorders (Robertson, 2000); (in)fertility (Letherby, 2003); and in health care (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong, 2009). The emotional work involved in researching sensitive topics has been conceptualised using Hochschild's theories of 'emotional labour' (1983 cited in Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). They conclude that 'emotional labour' is prevalent in sensitive research, as:

> Researchers may encounter many emotionally disturbing situations throughout their data collection, such as witnessing someone who is in acute psychological distress of crying uncontrollably. Being confronted by these types of reactions from research may compel researchers to reflect

> on aspects of their own lives, which can be an emotional experience. (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009, p.70).

This echoed some of my experiences, and to manage this I used a research diary and detailed responses to some of the things that we discussed. Although I had reflected upon the risk that the research could lead to emotional distress for the participants before the pilot study, I had not anticipated that listening to women's narratives may also impact me emotionally. Women spoke candidly, revealing accounts of life events that contained highly sensitive information. I found that writing up their stories (before transcription) soon after the interviews had taken place helped me to process what I had heard. My overall approach to the fieldwork having completed the pilot study, was to be mindful that ethics is an on-going process. It occurs before, during and after the research has taken place, in order to ensure that participants are protected. The level of personal detail some participants divulged about their lives surprised me, and this reminded me of the importance of reflexivity and sensitivity.

So far, I have critically examined some of the claims about the need for a specifically feminist epistemology and ontology, and the associated criticisms. I have attended to the values of feminist research by explaining how I have addressed issues of power, ethics and reflexivity. Next, I discuss the methodological approach and research design.

Methodological Approach

Feminist researchers can draw on qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods approaches to answer research questions. I opted for a qualitative approach as it was most appropriate for gaining an understanding of women learners' aspirations and experiences of FE from their unique perspective. A quantitative (positivist) approach was not suitable for this study as it was important to co-construct data with women learners about their lives and experiences and in doing so, I addressed a gap in the

quantitatively driven studies discussed in chapter one. Essentially, qualitative research does not regard data as ‘out there’ waiting to be collected or seek to prove reality, truth or fact, rather, it aims to understand, make sense of and interpret phenomena within their natural context (Flick, 2018). In line with feminist thinking, I view ‘data’ in relation to honouring women's voices and their agency – as something that is co-created, reflexive and dynamic.

In contrast to quantitative studies where the number of respondents (cases or data) and generalisability is important, qualitative research focuses on providing deep, rich and nuanced analysis of a small number of cases which prioritises trustworthiness and credibility. Voice, positionality, reflexivity and reciprocity have also been identified as emerging criteria for quality in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002). This study prioritised gaining a rich and deep understanding of the factors which shaped and influenced the aspirations of a relatively small and diverse sample of women learners, with the explicit aim of gaining a sense of the reasons why they return and the issues they face in doing so.

The Research Design

A longitudinal approach was adopted for the study, which enabled participants to be followed throughout the duration of their programme. More specifically, learners were interviewed at two phases during their programme – near the start and at the end. The first semi-structured interviews involved a co-construction of a life grid approximately two months after they had started their course. This allowed them time to ‘settle in' to study and the college environment. The second interviews were conducted in the final term of study; these involved reviewing the transcripts with the participants and asking new questions arising from these in line with the key research questions and themes (appendix five). The purpose of this was to gain a rich understanding of whether (and if so how) their values and aspirations changed or evolved over time. I noted in the pilot study, that the process of sharing their story had

enabled respondents to create links between their past, present and future lives that they had not considered before. Revisiting the participants enabled them to reflect on how their original views of themselves and their goals had changed or evolved as a result of re-engaging with education. A discussion of the strengths and limitations follows later, but the strength of this research design is that it aids a deep and thick understanding (Geertz, 1973) of lived experiences. At the same time, I acknowledge that learners were making sense of their lives while experiencing personal change associated with study.

Narrative approach

In everyday language, narratives have come to be associated with 'storytelling,' (Riessman, 2001, 2008; Polkinghorne, 1988; Plummer, 2001). Narrative research approaches and methods have been used in a variety of contexts such as psychotherapy, philosophy, ethnography, anthropology, social history and socio-linguistics, amongst others (Riessman, 2008). It can take the form of primary data (such as films, books, photographs or diaries) or the production of new materials with participants as life stories, diaries or photographic self-portraits (Squire et al., 2014). The idea that we can collect primary or secondary data sources suggests that narrative approaches are explicit and intentional. However, narratives can take an organic form, as in the case of this research whereby:

> The researcher may collect material that will likely include narratives without explicitly asking for them, for instance, by asking research participants to write about their personal experiences, or asking them to draw a family tree or simply encouraging them to talk at length about their opinions about something that matters strongly to them. (Squire et al., 2014, p.7).

Narrative approaches lend themselves particularly well to feminist research, especially for life story and identity work (Skeggs, 1988; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Letherby, 2003; Goodson, 2006; Riessman, 2008; Miller, 2017). Moreover, their strength lies in offering a person-centered approach for researching sensitive and traumatic subjects

that not only shapes people's lives, but their understandings of themselves (Presser, 2005; Hydén and Hyden, 2015; Browne, Marsh, Taylor and Davis, 2016; Miller, 2017). Narratives in the form of talk gave space and agency for participants' voices to be heard in their words and using their own reflections, and I discuss how this made it an appropriate approach for this research later in the chapter.

Phases of Data Collection

I conducted a pilot study (Phase I) during 2015 in order to evaluate the viability of research questions, and to test the suitability of the methods with participants in the research context for the PhD study. I used convenience sampling to recruit nine women learners who were over the age of 25 studying on full-time full-year vocational courses at three FE colleges. I chose three FE colleges because it gave me the opportunity to interview learners in a range of geographical locations, who were enrolled on a broad range of courses within different types of FE institutions.

I interviewed these students about their educational biographies, their aspirations and how these had evolved during their course of study. These students were followed up (phase II) during 2015-16 about their educational aspirations and how their progress towards them was going. A few changes needed to be made to the research questions, interview topics and the life grids following the pilot (phase I). However, some of the stories shared by a few participants were highly sensitive and harrowing and therefore, the main reflections I had were about the most appropriate and ethical way of dealing with this data.

Phase III of the study was conducted in the second half of the autumn term in 2016-17 (October to December). I interviewed 12 students at two FE colleges on a variety of programmes and followed up with them at the end of their course (Phase IV). Although I used the same criteria in phase I/II to select the institutions for phase III/IV, I approached Adult College because of its specialist nature and City College because it was another inner-city college that gave me access to a sample of learners on a range of interesting courses.

I outline the data collection phases in the table below:

Phases of data collection
Phase I: During the pilot, I interviewed nine students about their biographies and educational aspirations during their course (April 2015) Sample: Metropolitan – Hair/Hair and Beauty/Beauty; Northern – Access to Health Care; Rural – Small Animal Management
Phase II: Following the completion of the pilot (September 2015), I conducted second interviews with the nine students who I had interviewed in Phase I. All of these students had finished their initial vocational course and had either progressed onto the next level in the FE college or had gone to university. Sample: As above
Phase III: A further twelve participants were recruited from two more FE colleges – the life grids were completed at the start of the first interview. These were conducted between October and December 2016. Sample: City – ESOL +Vocational/Teaching Assistant/Access to Nursing; Adult – Access to Social Science
Phase IV: I interviewed the twelve participants from phase III towards the end of their course between May and June 2017. Sample: As above

Table 1: Phases of data collection

I offered participants from each phase of the study an opportunity to maintain contact so that we could keep in touch about their aspirations over time. However, it was only a small number of participants (6 out of 21[62]) from Phase III/IV who had transitioned into HE (at university or in FE Colleges), that have maintained contact with me via email or phone. I continue to keep in contact with learners where possible, although this has proven to be difficult as they navigate the pressures of HE study.

[62] This included 3 learners on hair and beauty courses at Metropolitan; 1 learner from small animal management (Rural) and 2 learners from Access to Health Sciences (Northern).

Sampling and negotiating access

The data presented in chapter one revealed that adult women learners are not a homogenous group; rather, they are diverse in terms of their ethnicity and age, as well as being on a range of different programme levels. My sampling choices were ontologically driven by the desire to try to surface a diversity of responses which would generate empirical and theoretical richness, rather than typical cases or statistical trends. Despite the fact that my thesis is not making any claims to statistical significance, the women learners who self-selected are fairly typical in terms of those in the sector, as well as the individual colleges. The sample consisted of twenty-one women whose ages ranged from 25-47, who were on a variety of vocationally related courses across five different colleges. Being over 25 years of age was an important factor because it related to the availability of funding and loans[63] from public funding bodies who have now introduced a new 'young adult' category for learners aged 19-24[64]. I wanted to capture the diversity of adult women learners' experiences and aspirations across a range of courses, which because of the funding cuts, had very small numbers of learners on each programme. In this section, I outline in more detail the characteristics of my sample and how I gained access to them, as well as the colleges and courses.

Negotiating Access to the Sample

I decided early on that the most efficient way to gain access to the study participants was to approach gatekeepers at FE colleges directly and ask for access. As I highlighted earlier, I was keen to gain access to a broad range of FE colleges, including adult residential and land-based colleges. Moreover, the aim was to gain access to students from different geographical locations including towns, cities and rural locations.

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[63] Advanced Learning Loans (ALL) are only available to learners who are working towards an NQF Level 3 qualification.

[64] The new 19-24 'adult category' is aimed at reducing the number of NEETs. As such, they benefit from different funding opportunities and courses to learners aged 25+.

Therefore, I approached gatekeepers whom I knew from my long-standing career in the FE sector prior to my pilot study in 2015 (phase I and II), who granted me access to their sites (Northern, Metropolitan and Rural)[65]. In addition, they also supported me to gain a sample of learners from three different curriculum areas/courses[66] which they had identified as having the highest population of women learners aged 25 plus (Small animal care, Hair/Hair and Beauty/Beauty, Access to Health Care[67]).

Access to colleges proved to be more problematic in phases III and IV. As a consequence of dramatic funding cuts and strategic area reviews, two of the three colleges had merged and were in the process of making redundancies and rationalising programme offers. Therefore, I approached several senior staff in different FE colleges who were introduced to me by mutual contacts, and two new colleges agreed to be part of the sample (City College and Adult College). This provided access to students on a broad range of courses (ESOL + vocational/Teaching Assistants/Access to Nursing/Access to Social Studies).

Initial contact was made with gatekeepers at each institution where I shared information about the purpose and scope of the study. At this point, I asked if they had vocationally related courses with adult women learners who met the sampling criteria. I provided each site and gatekeeper with the ethical information and gave them the opportunity to ask questions and circulate the information to students on specific courses. In all cases, gatekeepers suggested specific programmes where they felt that the majority of the sample could be found. Unsurprisingly, these students were on what could be described as 'female dominated' courses. My attempts to access women learners on 'male dominated' courses (e.g. construction, engineering or technology), were unsuccessful at each of the five sites as there were no students who

[65] The characteristics of each of these colleges are discussed later in this chapter.
[66] One curriculum area at each college
[67] Course types will be outlined later in this chapter.

met the sampling criteria. The sample was recruited in two ways: either in response to a 'call for participants' which was circulated to specific groups by gatekeepers ahead of my scheduled visit; or as a result of my visits to whole groups of learners where I explained the study and ethical information directly. In the following section, I describe the sample of colleges, courses and participants.

The Colleges

Colleges were selected on the basis of their diversity in terms of their specialism (e.g. residential, land-based, general FE), and their local geographical contexts (e.g. city, rural and town). I described earlier, that the aim of this approach was to gain a broad overview of women learners' experiences in diverse types of college and courses. In what follows, I describe the college contexts, their demographic and the courses which were part of the sample, before concluding with a comparison of the diversity of the college and the sample.

Adult College is a specialist adult and community education college in a rural northern location offering both residential and non-residential courses. The college is a historic building (Grade I listed) of local historical interest which is set in extensive gardens. Over the past three decades, the local area has suffered significant industrial and economic decline resulting in high unemployment rates. The college has around 6000 total registrations per annum; the majority of these are short adult and community leisure courses aimed at widening participation[68] and some 480 on FE programmes. Students are often introduced to Adult College on short non-accredited courses such as self-help, overcoming depression, literacy and numeracy amongst others, before progressing onto longer accredited courses such as Level 2 in Health and Social Care. Students have the opportunity to progress from Level 2 courses onto Access Courses (in Health and Social Care, Humanities or Information Technology). It is important to

[68] Socially excluded individuals such as those who are long term unemployed, rehabilitating from addiction, overcoming mental illness and victims of domestic violence.

note that students can benefit from studying on a part-time residential basis if they undertake courses up to Level 2, and on a full-time basis if they are on a Level 3 course.

City College is situated in the Midlands, and at the time of my research, was one of two major FE colleges in the city with over 14,000 learners[69]. This college offers a broad range of provision for learners from 14+ in FE as well as HE. It has three large sites across the city in addition to local adult and community partnerships where courses are offered. I visited two sites: a historical college in the centre of town and the other, a site on the outskirts which had been built in the 1960s. The student population was diverse; I interviewed learners who had migrated from Africa, Asia, and Europe, as well as those who were born locally. I spoke to learners on ESOL (with vocational tasters) courses as well as those on Access to Nursing and Teaching Assistant courses.

Metropolitan College was the second largest of the colleges I visited in a large city in the Midlands. At the time of the research, they had over 12,000 learners who were studying at eight campuses across the city. Their student population is representative of the diversity within the city. It specialises in creative and vocational subjects and offers a broad range of courses to learners aged 14+ in FE, as well as a range of specialist vocational HE level courses too. I interviewed learners at Metropolitan College[70] who were on hair or beauty courses on a variety of levels.

Northern College is situated in the centre of a town in the north of England. The town has suffered economic decline due to the loss of mining and manufacturing industries. The site is a new build and has around 5500 enrolments per annum. Like Metropolitan College, it offers new vocational training facilities and a broad range of FE courses, as

[69] These two colleges have merged since my research.
[70] Metropolitan College has since merged with two other colleges.

well as the option to progress on to HE courses at the specialist university centre. I interviewed learners on the Access to Health and Social Work courses.

Rural college is primarily a specialist land-based FE and HE college in a rural part of Northern England. The college is situated on three different sites which are located over a 40-mile radius. Its average enrolment during the research was approximately 6000 enrolments; 2800 of these are on FE courses. The two sites I visited primarily offer courses in agriculture, horticulture, equine studies, turf management and small animal management from Level 1 to 6. They offer 18 different degree subjects at foundation or undergraduate level and benefit from having residential accommodation for FE learners who live in remote locations. Rural College had the lowest percentage of adult female students and ethnic minority learners out of all of the colleges I visited, which is likely to be due to the course offer, rural location and local population. The two learners I interviewed at Rural College were both on Small Animal Management programmes.

Thus far, I have given a broad overview of the FE institutions and the courses that formed part of the sample. The sample colleges were not only different in terms of their location, specialisms and course offers, but also in terms of learner diversity (age, gender and ethnicity), size and the number of adult learners (25+) which is illustrated in table 2 below. It is important to note that the available data does not offer a breakdown by ethnicity and gender in relation to age and therefore, the figures displayed in these columns are for all ages.

College	**Total number of FE Learners[71]**	**Number of Learners 25+ (n/a 52.9%)[72]**	**Female % (n/a 54.6%)[73]**	**Ethnicity [74, 75]**		
				Black/ Asian/ Minority (n/a 20.5)	**White (n/a 77.7%)**	**Other/ Unknown (n/a 1.8%)**
Adult college	480	446 (93%)[76]	58%	12.4%	86%	
City college*	8870	3725 (42%)[77]	62 %	26.7%	72.2%	
Metropolitan college	12270	7000 (57%)[77]	47%	70%	29%	
Northern College	5420	2059 (38%)[77]	56%	13%	87%	
Rural College	2790	725 (26%)[77]	35%	3.4%	90%	6.6%

Table 2: College data (ILR) – A comparison of learner numbers and diversity at sample colleges (2015-16) data

Source: Based on data taken from FE skills data service (2015-16 data) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/650237/FE_and_Skills_learners_by_provider_LA_learner_characteristics_1516_FINAL.xlsx, https://www.gov.uk/

[71] FE Learners includes Skills, maths and English up to Level 4 and excludes apprenticeships and community education.

[72] n/a = National college average of learners who are aged 25+

[73] n/a = National college average female learners of all ages, this figure does not reflect the percentage of females aged 25+ by college.

[74] These ethnic categories are an amalgamation of broader categories used in the ILR.

[75] n/a = National college averages by ethnic origin

[76] The percentage of all FE learners who are aged 25+ by college level.

What will be evident from the table is the stark differences in terms of ethnic diversity between the large inner-city colleges (e.g. City and Metropolitan) and the others (Adult, Northern and Rural). The diversity within colleges broadly reflects the local demographics[77] in which they are located; while there appears to be regional/county differences between colleges in the north (Adult, Northern and Rural) compared to those in the midlands (City and Metropolitan), these differences are probably coincidental.

It is unsurprising that at the time of study adult college had the highest number (93%) of learners aged 25+ due to its specialist nature and the restriction of applications to those aged 21+. However, other colleges such as Rural and Northern College, were below the national average in terms of the number of learners who were aged 25+. The lack of age diversity is understandable at Rural College, as it is a specialist agricultural and horticultural college and is difficult to access via public transport, meaning that even learners within the same county reside at the college. It is important to note, both Rural and Northern colleges are situated in areas of high deprivation, unemployment and deindustrialisation.

There have consistently been more adult female than male students in FE and the national college average stands at 54.6%[78]. At the time of the study, the majority of colleges in the sample (City, Adult and Northern) had above the national college percentage of female students, whereas others (Metropolitan and Rural College) were below the national average. The specialist course offer (e.g. agriculture, arboriculture,

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[77] As noted in the most recent data reports (e.g., from the local council, the UK data service and ONS data).

[78] According to the most recent ILR data in 2017/18: *https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765587/201718_FE_and_Skills_participation_demographic_tool.xlsx*

horticulture) at Rural College is the most likely reason why they had the least females. Although Metropolitan college had one of the highest numbers of learners aged 25+ and the highest proportion of ethnic minority students across the sample, the percentage of females was slightly below the national average. The aggregation of diversity data in the ILR (age/gender/ethnicity) makes it difficult to draw conclusions on this anomaly, but it suggests that there may be a link in this specific case between gender and ethnicity.

The programmes in the sample

The term 'vocational' was applied in the broadest sense to accurately reflect the diverse range of courses in the FE sector that enabled adult learners to access vocations. What was evident from communication with FE colleges and learners is that 'vocational' was understood in different ways. I applied the sampling strategy in three main ways. The most obvious examples of vocational courses were those that offered direct routes into employment which require skills training in workshops. Some examples include: Hairdressing, Catering, Floristry, Teaching Assistants, Nursery Nurses or Business Admin. On these programmes, adult learners were the minority in a cohort of school leavers except for Teaching Assistants. By far, Access to HE courses was the most populated by adults who were over 25, who had the explicit aim of gaining access to higher technical, professional or vocational qualifications at university such as Nursing, Social Work, Educational Psychology or Teaching degrees. Finally, there was a large body of learners who, in order to gain access onto vocational provision, had to acquire basic skills (numeracy and literacy) or ESOL first. This final category is not an obvious one however, there were examples in FE colleges where learners were completing their (ESOL/Basic) skills alongside vocational taster courses, specifically because they aspired to work in related vocations.

As discussed earlier, the funding restrictions and programme reductions for adult learners (over 25s) impacted which courses learners were on and at which levels.

There were fewer adult learners particularly on lower-level courses that do not fund learners who have previously achieved that level and were not eligible for Advanced Learning Loans (ALL). Conversely, there were more learners on Access to HE provision at NQF Level 3 or Level 3 courses that were eligible for funding. Courses such as basic skills continue to be funded publicly, while ESOL was funded out of a central adult education budget. The final sample included learners from Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy at levels 1, 2 and 3 (4), Teaching Assistant programmes at level 3 (3); Access to Nursing level 3 (3); Access to Social Sciences level 3 (4); Access to Health Sciences level 3 (2); Small Animal Management level 3 (2) and ESOL[79] with vocational elements entry-level (3). It was not possible to attract participants from diverse vocational areas on lower-level courses such as admin, nursery nursing and care, which is possibly due to the removal of funding for this provision for the majority of adults. However, I was still able to develop my understanding of how learners experience lower level (1 and 2) provision, as most of the participants had accessed Level 3 provision having completed Level 2 in the previous academic year.

Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy

Hair and Beauty Therapy National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were delivered at Metropolitan College from Levels 1 to 3. Hairdressing has a long history of supporting learning in the workplace through the apprenticeship model at Levels 2 and 3, with day release training in FE colleges or private training. Whereas Beauty Therapy has historically been delivered in FE colleges, this is primarily due to the personal and one to one nature of treatments. All the learners in the sample had started at Level 1 on either Hairdressing or Beauty Therapy. Learners on these courses had access to simulated salon environments where they worked on ‘real clients’.

[79] ESOL – English as a Second Language

Small Animal Management

This BTEC course was offered at Level 2 and 3, and there was no pre-requisite for learners to complete Level 2 before progressing onto Level 3. Typically, in the college I visited, Small Animal Management gave learners access to careers in Veterinary nurse, Small Animal Care and Dog Training. The college provided practical skills in a dedicated yard area, which had facilities where a variety of small animals could be managed. The facility was in a national park and teaching was carried out in some original farm buildings; this was separate from the main college some eight miles away.

Teaching Assistants

This programme was offered at Levels two and three with an opportunity to progress onto a Foundation Degree at the college. Students were enrolled on a one-year Level three Teaching Assistant course delivered over two and a half days a week. Half a day involved theoretical lessons at college and an unpaid placement within schools on the other two days across the city – which the learners were responsible for arranging. Learners who had not achieved GCSE Maths and English before joining the course were required to complete this as an additional course.

Access Courses

All of the colleges in the sample offered Access to HE programmes at Level three, which is an alternative entry requirement to A Levels or BTEC qualifications. It was a popular course; 8 out of 21 respondents were working towards these qualifications and most of those had accessed the college via a Level two qualification first. Participants were on a variety of Access courses such as Access to Nursing (City), Access to Social Science (Adult) and Access to Health Studies (Northern). Those on Access to Nursing or Health Studies generally progressed into HE to do various health care degrees (e.g. nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy); Access to Social Science tended to progress onto HE courses in counselling, psychology or youth work.

ESOL

The sample included three learners at City College who were on the highest level of the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programme, alongside gaining experience in a vocational area. Two of the learners on this course were also completing ‘taster vocational courses' in addition to their programme, intending to progress onto NVQ 1 in the future, and one was on an Adult Apprenticeship in Business Admin.

The Participants

There were 21 participants who, despite being a self-selected sample, were diverse in terms of their ethnicity, the course they were on and the level of course (see table 3 below). Even though this a relatively small sample and cannot claim statistical significance, the diversity of the sample within each college broadly reflected the college averages – a point I return to later when comparing the college data.

Table 3: Diversity of the sample by college

College	Number of learners in the sample of 21	Courses enrolled on (number of learners)[80]	Ethnicity [81] of the sample % by college and (college average)		
			Black/ Asian/Minority	White	Other/ Unknown
Adult	4/21	SS (4)	0 (12.4%)	100% (86%)	0 (1.6%)
City	8/21	ESOL+ (3) TA (3) N (2)	50% (72.2%)	37.5% (26.7%)	12.5% (1.1%)
Metropolitan	4/21	H (2) B (1) HB (1)	75% (70%)	25% (29%)	0 (1%)
Northern	3/21	HC (3)	0 (13%)	100% (87%)	0 (<1%)
Rural	2/21	SA (2)	0 (3.4%)	100% (90%)	0 (6.6%)
Totals	**21 learners**	**21 learners**	**28.5 % (6 learners) (n/a[82] 22%)**	**67 % (14 learners)** ***(n/a 77%)***	**4.76% (1) (n/a 1%)**

Source: National averages based on data taken from ILR data

[80] Course descriptor key: TA = Teaching assistant; HC = Health Care; N=Nursing; SS=Social sciences; H= Hairdressing; B= Beauty; HB=Hair and Beauty; BA=Business Admin; ESOL+= ESOL plus vocational taster; SA=small animal care.
[81] These ethnic categories are an amalgamation of broader categories used in the ILR.
[82] n/a = college national averages.

Table 3 shows that sixty-seven per cent (14) were white which included: White British (12), White Other (Eastern European) (1) and Irish Traveller (1); Twenty-nine per cent of the learners (6) were from BME backgrounds: British Asian (1), Pakistani (2), Black African (2) and Mixed-race (1); and one Iranian participant identified as 'other'. While the age of the participants was important in relation to the minimum age of 25, it was notable that the age profile of the sample was skewed towards the lower age range; two-thirds of the sample were aged 25-34; in contrast, less than a third were aged 35-49. These age-related data are consistent with national trends (Augar, 2019; BIS,2019).

In addition to diversity in terms of age and ethnicity, table 4 (below) shows other important characteristics that learners shared such as their status as migrants, carers, spouses and employees. The majority of the learners (95%) had some form of caring responsibilities (e.g. parenting, sibling or elder care), more than half of these (52%) described themselves as lone parents. Just over a third of all learners (38%) identified that they had a diagnosed mental or physical disability, while almost a third of the sample were migrants (29%). In terms of employment status, only around a quarter (24%) of learners were employed at the start of the course and this rose slightly as they progressed through the course (to 38%).

	Caring responsibilities[83]	**Lone parent/carer**	**Migration data**	**Employed**	**Disability[84] (mental/physical)**
Proportion of the overall sample	20/21 (95%)	11/20 (52%)	6/21 (29%)	8/21 (38%)	8/21 (38%)

Table 4: Categories of disadvantage (whole sample)

[83] Including Child/elderly/vulnerable adult care.
[84] Mental or physical disability.

Saliently, the work undertaken by all learners could be classified as low paid and precarious as they were employed on either temporary, casual or fixed-term contracts. While I am not claiming statistical significance of these group of characteristics due to the sample size, their significance will become evident later on when I discuss the impact of these on how individual women were able to pursue their aspirations. These characteristics reveal some of the ways that women experience intersecting disadvantages —which from a feminist economics perspective, includes lack of time, caring, economic disadvantage, as well as their migrant and welfare status.

It is important to note that although these data are listed separately in table 4 (above), the categories were not mutually exclusive; rather, individuals identified as having multiple characteristics (table 4) which intersected in particular ways. Table 5 (see p.124) details these characteristics at an individual level. Note how individuals sometimes shared characteristics in common; for example, both Nia and Precious were migrants, as well as being lone parents and in employment at the start of their course. However, characteristics did not always correlate in this way; for example, not all migrants were lone mothers, employed or an ethnic minority.

Table five reveals the complexity and heterogeneity of the sample.

	Migrant	Caring responsibilities			Employed*	BME/ other**	Disability
		Parent (married/ cohabiting)	*Lone parent*	*Other care (single)*			
Nia	X		X		X	X	
Precious	X		X		X	X	
Fazia	X		X			X	
Ana	X		X		X		
Tatva	X	X				X	
Hoda	X					X	
Andrea			X		X		X
Safina			X			X	X
Kathleen			X			X	
Jess			X			X	
Chloe			X				X
Jackie			X				X
Michelle			X				
Amy		X					X
Jane		X					
Kate		X			X		
Toni		X			X		
Debbie		X			X		
Collette				X	X		X
Sarah				X			X
Emma				X			X

Table 5: Intersecting characteristics of disadvantage

*In low paid and precarious contracts (temporary, casual or fixed-term)
** BME/Other – includes those identifying as black, minority ethnic, other (e.g., Iranian) and white other (e.g., Irish Traveller)

At the same time, it shows the potential to reflect on how and if these factors shape their aspirations and experiences. Therefore, I subdivided these into four key groups: migrants (yellow), lone parents (green), coupled parents (blue) and single carers (orange). The table highlights some of the patterns of disadvantage experienced by certain groups; at the same time, noting that these are small sample sizes and that there is heterogeneity across these sub-groups. The two most disadvantaged groups in

terms of the number of characteristics individuals in this group held were the migrant learners. The migrant learners (6/21) had the highest number of characteristics of disadvantage and were more likely to be an ethnic minority (5/21). The second most disadvantaged group were the lone mothers (6/21), who were the most likely of all groups to also suffer a disability (4/6).

Methods

As previously discussed, the majority of learners were interviewed throughout the academic year on two occasions – once near the beginning and again towards the end of their courses. Although all of the courses in the sample were one year, some learners who were progressing onto further courses or undergraduate programmes agreed to be followed up by email and telephone. The purpose of the first interview was primarily to establish why learners had chosen to return to education and what their aspirations were, with their life history forming vital background information about their life choices. The second interview drew on the information shared in the first interview to evaluate the extent to which their original aspirations were still relevant and what they planned to do after their course finished.

Life Grids

To support participants in plotting key points in their educational and life history, a 'life grid' was used during the first interview. Essentially, they are visual templates with life stages mapped out on one axis and different aspects of life/life events mapped on the other axis. They originate in social science research and have been used in therapeutic work (Bell, 2005); social work (Wilson, Cunnigham-Burley, Bancroft, Backett-Milburn and Masters, 2007) and health research (Parry, Thomson and Fowkes, 1999). The life grid used in my thesis was adapted from biographical research with sociology undergraduate students (Abbas, Ashwin and McLean, 2013). I expanded the age range

and some of the categories to better reflect the research questions and the different life stage of the 'mature' participants.

School stage/age	Education	Family	Housing	Significant Friends and relationships	Hobbies or out of school activities	Parents' Employment/ own employment	Health
Preschool							
KS1							
KS2							
Secondary							
Post-secondary							

Figure 8: Life Grid (scaled version)

The life grid (figure 8, see also app. 7) shows how broad educational stages reflecting the current UK educational system was used on the y-axis. Where learners had not completed their education in the UK, I either explained them or substituted them with ages. The x-axis reflected different areas of life that I had determined through the pilot study which could have an impact (positively or negatively) upon educational experiences, trajectories, and aspirations. It was not the intention that the 'life grid' was a complete picture of participants' biographies where every square had an entry. Instead, its purpose was to act as an aide memoir for key life events.

The value of life grids in facilitating memory recall of older participants was evident in the health research on smoking (Parry et al., 1999). Furthermore, the life grid is a beneficial tool for exploring sensitive research topics with participants (Bell, 2005;

Parry et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 2007). In their sensitive research on substance abuse, Wilson et al (2007) explained that the:

> Critical advantages of the life grid in qualitative research include: its visual element, which can help to engage the interviewer and interviewee in a process of constructing and reflecting on a concrete life history record: its role in creating a more relaxed research encounter supportive of the respondent's voice; and facilitating the discussion of sensitive issues. (2007, p.135).

The life grids were co-created with the participants at the start of the interviews, who appeared to visibly relax during this process. I noticed that this helped me to develop a rapport much more quickly than in my previous experiences of face-to-face interviews. I attribute this to the visual nature of the life grid, where the focus is on the task of co-constructing life experiences on a page rather than being questioned on it more directly as is often the case with face-to-face interviewing. In addition to facilitating rapport and working with sensitive topics, I observed how it supported participants in recalling biographical details and in the temporal ordering of what was important to them. The life grid provided an overview of some critical life events or 'turning points, which I was able to explore more fully during the interviews. Furthermore, this prior knowledge of individuals' lives from their perspective, enabled me to tailor questions to ask about areas where there were silences or expand on relationships between critical life events and learning.

Interviewing the participants

My interview approach echoed my feminist epistemological approach where I aimed to understand their unique world through their eyes (Smith, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Harding, 2008). Their voices and specific stories were placed at the forefront of the interviews; I encouraged them to speak freely and reflexively throughout the interview. It was essential for me to acknowledge that despite women's voices being central to the research, interviews are primarily a social process where knowledge is

co-constructed with participants. This point will be expanded upon further when an analysis of the data is discussed.

Interview approaches have been categorised by the amount of structure they have (structured, semi-structured and unstructured) (Kvale, 2007), with each having different purposes that reflect the researcher's positionality and approach. Such categorisations are not always useful, and I see the structure on a continuum with grey areas in-between and the potential to use the structure in different ways throughout the interview. Women's voices are central to this research, therefore, I adopted a similar approach to Wright (2013) and Daniels (2010), whereby participants were encouraged to speak freely in an unstructured way for part of the interview, but it was also necessary to prepare for more structured questioning. Even though I had prepared questions on various topics, I followed the advice of feminist researchers Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007) and gave more consideration to the types of questions and how I asked them, rather than how structured the interview was (app. 6).

In practice, this approach to interviews was particularly useful when the learners' first language was not English; more specific questioning enabled them to articulate their life story with greater ease. Taking this blended approach to the interviews enabled me to overcome some of the criticisms of being too flexible, which ultimately could have an impact on the quality of the data and analysis.

The first interviews started with the completion of the life history grid with the learners at the start of the interview. I had some questions to prompt participants for each life category (e.g., education) which helped to guide and facilitate a discussion about key factors that had led them to this point. I prepared some questions which were fairly broad to ask at the first interview after the life grid had been completed, which focused more specifically on their aspirations, values, educational experiences, barriers and hopes for the future (app. 7). This approach to the interview gave a basis

for a later discussion with them about how their aspirations had been shaped by previous experiences, as well as focusing on where they hoped to be in the future.

An outline of the questions and lines of enquiry for the second interview can be found in appendix five. The purpose of the second interview was to establish how they were progressing towards their aspirations, what barriers they had to navigate in order to pursue their goals and what support they had received. Importantly, this interview focused on how their aspirations had changed over time. Before the second interviews, I read the transcriptions while listening to the recordings. Doing this acted as a powerful reminder of the individuals' life story and how they positioned themselves in relation to their learning and aspirations. This also helped to provide new lines of enquiry, as I gained a more nuanced understanding from hearing their words after having some distance from the transcriptions. This approach enabled me to adapt questions so that they were relevant and specific to the individual and to reflect with them on their progress to date.

I recognised that developing rapport and relationships with my participants early on was essential. The first opportunity for this was during my initial conversation where I explained what the research was about and the nature of informed consent, this was conducted at the start of the interview, but one college asked me to address a whole cohort to discuss my research. A reciprocal discussion is recommended as a technique by feminist researchers to help build rapport at the start of the interview (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007); I opened up the conversation with a brief exchange about things we had in common (such as education). At each introduction, I explained my background as a lecturer in the FE sector, how I had returned to education as an adult learner and was interested in the lives of women learners in FE specifically. The benefit of co-constructing the life grid at the start of the interview was that it acted as an ‘ice breaker.' This approach enabled the co-construction of knowledge with the learners, and this had the explicit aim of encouraging them to be agential so that their voices

were centre stage (Reinharz, 1992; Reinharz and Chase, 2001). As stated earlier in the discussion, reflexivity and reciprocity were essential features throughout the research interviews. Because I was conscious of the impact of the interview topics and process on the respondent, I was able to adapt to their responses accordingly. This meant that I carefully observed subtle changes in body language to check how comfortable they felt discussing the topic and to check whether they understood the questions that I had asked them.

Each interview was digitally recorded and stored as an MP4 file, and the entire interview was recorded including the completion of the life grid. I transcribed my interviews in a batch after each phase of the research. The words spoken within the interview were transcribed verbatim. Whilst this did not include all pauses or voice tone changes, emotional responses or long silences were noted. They were transcribed in sufficient detail to gain an understanding of individuals' narratives and their sometimes contradictory nature. A printed version of the transcriptions was offered to participants after each interview; some accepted them while others chose not to. Before each interview in phase two, I listened to their interview while reading through the transcription again. Re-reading the transcriptions while listening to them brought their stories to life, and the silences and the contradictions highlighted potential areas to explore further in their second interviews. Although I had gained a good sense of the main narratives, the second listening emphasised some of the more subtle narratives which proved to be extremely useful in the second interviews.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was given by the School of Education for both the pilot and the larger PhD study (app. 6). The British Education Research Association Guidelines (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2011) were used as a starting point for

considering how any ethical issues should be managed during the study. In this section, I discuss how I gained informed and ongoing consent from participants. This is followed by my critical personal reflections on the nature of dealing with sensitive and distressing topics.

Initial contact was made with the 'gatekeepers' at the institutions via email. Information about the project and informed consent forms were attached to the email including information about the project for institutions (app. 3); participants (app. 1) and consent forms (app. 2 & 4). They were assured that while every attempt would be made to ensure institutional anonymity, it could not be fully guaranteed as a couple of colleges were highly specialised in the UK FE context, making them more easily identifiable. At the first meeting with gatekeepers, I discussed my research, they signed the consent forms, and we agreed on how the research visits would take place. For the most part, colleges organised a mutually convenient date/s for the interviews and provided a space to conduct them in a private space; whereas others had limited space and therefore some of these interviews were conducted within quiet areas of the library or café bar. After the initial meetings, all colleges consented to me arranging further meetings and follow-ups with learners on an individual basis.

Participants who consented to participate in the research were given pseudonyms, they were assured that their personal information would be treated as confidential and would be anonymised. I also explained their 'right to withdraw'. Information about the secure storage of digital recordings, transcripts, and paper files was given to all participants and reaffirmed at follow up meetings. I discussed with participants what the interviews would entail and the purpose of the project, giving them opportunities to ask any questions throughout the research. Many of them followed up with questions after the interview itself about the research and how it would be used. Some participants were so interested in the research that they asked for

publications/conference papers which I have been able to send to them. Participants were given the opportunity to receive a copy of their transcripts by email.

It is crucial that one is mindful of the risk that questions about one's life history may cause distress to the participant. In particular, I was aware from the pilot study that by giving space for women with vulnerabilities to share their life experiences, that they may disclose painful or distressing memories. The process of using life history narrative interviews involves a co-construction of the participant's story, where participants can choose to disclose (or not) painful memories that have shaped their lives. Whether they disclose these memories or filter them, they may need to be processed after the interview. In preparation for this, I had the college student services information so that they could access a professional referral and familiarised myself with the 'safeguarding policies of each college. As will be evident within the findings section, there were some distressing disclosures made during the interviews and great care was taken to ensure that they received the necessary support. My research approach was reflective throughout; I considered the potentially harmful and positive impacts on each respondent. I was mindful and responsive throughout the interview process. I noticed how participants reacted to specific questions or how the discussion of their life grid changed depending on what stories they were sharing.

Before the interviews, I had carefully explained the topic areas covered and the reasons why we were discussing those. In particular, I suggested that if they found any topic or question distressing or that they did not want to answer, they could signal and I would either change direction or allow them time to compose themselves. I had considered the potential that respondents might share more than they anticipated, therefore I gave them the option to request that their disclosures could go 'off the record' at any time, but nobody did. I asked one woman in particular who had freely given the harrowing details of her life at several points, whether she wanted some of it to be 'off the record.' She replied:

> No, I do not want to go off record, this needs to be heard. These stories, they need to be told. Women like me, this happens to us all of the time. I wrote it as a memoir anyway which I tore up because I found it too painful to recall. So, I want my story to be heard – not just for me but for all women. (Safina)

I had to manage a situation where a couple of respondents got a little emotional as they reflected on the painful memories that they had. I gently interrupted them, and as they composed themselves, they were keen to continue with the story. In both cases, the learners reflected on how much they had enjoyed sharing their story and they claimed it had been cathartic. On a couple of other occasions, it was evident from the body language of the respondents that the question was too sensitive or painful for them to discuss, without saying anything, I changed the topic to something that was likely to be less sensitive.

Data Analysis

I explained earlier how taking a narrative approach to the interviews had resulted in rich and complex accounts from women who were rarely afforded a voice. However, the analyses of narratives have been subject to critique because of the potential that any reading of them is too subjective. In response to these criticisms, a wide range of approaches to analysing narrative interviews which reflected the different epistemological and ontological positions have been taken (Polkinghorne, 1988; Plummer, 2001; Riessman, 2001; Squire, Davis, Esin, Andrews, Harrison, Hyden and Hyden, 2014).

Although the term 'narrative' is contested, I understand them to give rich knowledge about the narrators as agents and actors in their own lives and within the constraints of their social situation. The most developed and systematic approach is that of Doucet and Mauthner (2008), who follow the advice of Brown (1987, p.33), who says that we

need to read transcripts “each time listening in a different way” (ibid., p.33). They propose four readings of the narratives which are:

1. *Relational and reflexively constituted narratives* - where the transcript is read for central storylines and the researchers' reflections to that are recorded.
2. *Tracing narrated subjects* – considering how the person speaks about her/himself and the parameters of their social world.
3. *Reading for relational narrated subjects* – this relates to their conceptions of agency and their social/intimate relationships.
4. *Reading for structured subjects* – this involved focusing on power relationships and dominant ideologies.

This approach assisted in the interpretation of the narrators' lived experiences, in particular how their aspirations are formed, transformed and constrained. It is person-centred and positions women's experiences as heterogeneous. However, in order to engage with issues such as structure and agency and to be able to deconstruct them, it was useful to look across cases for particular themes that helped to interpret what was happening. Therefore, I followed the advice of Shukla et al. that:

> ….combining thematic and narrative approaches, our work has illuminated the complementarity of these two approaches. (2014, p.4; see also Floersch et al., 2010).

Thus, I have adapted my approach to narrative analysis outlined above and combined it with a thematic approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Where narratives focus on the interpretation of the individual stories, thematic analysis gives a broader overview of groups of cases.

I transcribed each of the interviews in full after each interview. With the aid of the interview data and my journal, I was able to note long pauses, voice tone changes, and emotional responses. After transcribing the first round of interviews I read and listened to them several times.

I followed Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) advice to read them with a different focus each time. These being:

- The central storyline and key turning points.
- How they positioned themselves in the story.
- How they positioned themselves in relation to others – are they agential?
- How is power exercised – what were the constraints?

The second stage was to write up the participant's story using these focal points as a tool to structure them and as a reminder of the individuals.

The third stage I re-read each of the original transcripts to identify high-level patterns and themes across the data. What became clear at the most abstracted level was that learners' stories answered questions about:

- Their aspirations and how they were formed.
- What structures they had to navigate in order to pursue their aspirations.
- How and why their aspirations changed over time.

The fourth stage involved a further reading of the transcripts, looking for talk and meaning-making which reflected a growing SoA, structural constraints, change in aspirations.

For example, in chapter 6, I highlighted any quotes where respondents had talked about any aspirations they had and the circumstances surrounding their success or failure.

Strengths and Limitations of the study

This study could have been strengthened by using discrete cohort samples of learners. However, even though this was my initial intention, it proved to be difficult in the respect that mature learners (over 25) were not found within large discrete cohorts. This was found to be the case even with the Access provision which is aimed at

learners over 19. Instead, the trend tended toward mature learners being more fragmented throughout FE institutions. I would argue that this reflects the reduction in adult education budgets and the introduction of learning loans. Even though the learner sample was diverse, they had all joined their course with aspirations towards specific vocational careers – whether that be immediate or after further study. Moreover, despite their heterogeneity regarding course choice, level and college, there was a sense that they shared common histories and future aspirations.

Narrative and life history approaches are subject to criticism for a number of reasons which I will now address. Firstly, I have explained how my feminist epistemology and ontology was concerned with ensuring that women's voices are heard. However, the act of analysing and re-telling narratives for research can present potential ethical issues (Josselson, 2011; Borland, 2013). One personal research dilemma I encountered, was that even though I claimed to hear women's voices, I had to interpret them through a theoretical lens. With this in mind, I followed Josselson (2011) in ensuring that I was clear to participants that during the interpretation of the data, researchers bring in their subjectivity (2011, p.49). Furthermore, Borland (2013) warns us of re-telling life histories using a contemporary theoretical lens. Therefore, I chose one that allowed multiple constructions and interpretations to be drawn. Participants' ability to recall the details of their life history is a potential weakness of narrative methods (as discussed earlier, the life grids provided a useful aide-memoire for some of the general details). However, Ricoeur (1995) reminds us that life stories are told retrospectively and that in the process of re-telling, the stories themselves have been reflected upon and are presented with the knowledge that comes from personal experience and hindsight. In the re-telling of their own stories, there is the potential for the storyteller to filter out certain parts and foreground others that they considered important. It is the way the person wants to be positioned in relation to their lives having looked at it through a new lens.

While narrative and life history methods provided a rich and deep understanding of individual lives, they have been charged with being 'too individual.' Associated with this, is the heterogeneity of life experiences and how it is possible to provide an analysis that can be generalised beyond the individual experience and be useful. In response to this critique, I would argue that the narratives within this research offered a nuanced, in-depth understanding of the heterogeneity of women learners' life trajectories and choices, while at the same time, the threads and themes that run through these individual stories highlight that despite this heterogeneity and individuality, there is commonality too.

Conclusions

This chapter started with a critical discussion of my feminist epistemology and how this shaped the research study and in particular, how this has influenced me to critically self-reflect throughout the duration of this study and reflect on some of the ethical issues involved. I have provided a critical explanation about the key decisions I made regarding the research design, the sample, the pilot study, methods, and data analysis, as well as the strengths and limitations of the study. The following two chapters explore the findings of the research; chapter five presents the data from the first interview and broadly explores women learners' biographies, their aspirations and what factors from their past have shaped their aspirations, and chapter six explores the data from the second interviews which considered women learners' journeys towards their aspirations and the extent to which they realised their aspirations. Although I have taken a chronological approach, aspirations must be thought of as being complex, dynamic, emergent and influenced by the past as well as the present.

Chapter Five – Returning to College

Introduction

The findings have been structured chronologically across the two findings chapters, the first interviews are presented here and the second interviews in chapter six. Although this broadly reflects learners' journeys through their course, they should be read as being dynamic as the past, present and future intertwine in complex ways. This chapter presents the findings from the first interviews that took place at the start of the course, which sought to understand why women learners had returned to college, what their aspirations were and the influence that their life history had had on their educational aspirations. Moreover, the structural constraints which impacted on women learners' 'capacity to aspire' at the outset were considered and the ways in which they resisted these negative impacts on their life goals.

This chapter has been organised into three main parts which reflects the theoretical framework outlined in chapter three. The first section is the largest and focuses on the 'Capacity to Aspire' and has been divided into two sub-sections; the first sub-section considers what women learners' initial aspirations were, and the second sub-section examines the critical life events which led them to develop educational aspirations. Next, I consider the structural constraints that women learners had to navigate at the very start of their course. Relatedly, in the final section, I present findings which reflect the ways in which the women in this study engaged in a variety of bargaining processes to ensure that they could pursue their aspirations. The findings are largely presented thematically; however, because sufficient detail of learners' life histories is required, in the sub-section on the influence of life events on aspirations, this has been organised thematically but with longer narrative stories.

The Capacity to Aspire

Initial Aspirations: Why am I here?

!n chapter three, I argued that in order to make judgements about the CTA, we need to understand what learners' aspirations are and how they change over time. In response to these omissions, I have conceptualised them as 'initial aspirations', which can be defined as the aspirations that individual participants expressed at their first interview. The analysis of the data suggests that there were five main types of initial aspirations (IA), which I have categorised as: instrumental, vocational, pragmatic, status and integrative. Even though these will be defined and discussed in the next section individually, it is worth pausing to note some key points here. Firstly, I observed that learners cited gaining qualifications or work as their main goal; secondly, I noted that learners' aspirations tended to be plural and lastly, that there were not only a range of aspirations within most categories, but that some learners expressed multiple initial aspirations.

Every participant answered the question about aspirations by stating that they wanted to gain qualifications and/or employment, which I have termed **instrumental aspirations**. Participants reflected on the qualifications, employment prospects and financial security that they had now and where they wanted to be, this echoes the suggestions made by Ray about the ways in which individuals' aspirations are formed within the aspiration window and in relation to an aspiration gap. It was unsurprising given the vocational nature of the courses they were pursuing, that the qualifications and job that they were hoping to progress onto were aligned for the majority of participants.[85]

[85] With the exception of those on ESOL courses.

The examples below illustrate the most common response to questions about aspirations:

> I want to be a nurse. (Nia).
>
> I've always wanted to be a hairdresser. (Jess).
>
> I chose this course because I want to go on to university to become a physio. (Debbie).

And yet, the qualification aspirations were not as linear, straightforward or narrow as the dominant discourse of VET suggests. Rather, there were some learners who were pursuing courses at a lower, an equivalent or higher level than they had previously achieved, in order to gain access to the job or HE course to which they aspired.

Respondents who were hoping to progress directly from college into vocational roles (e.g., Hair and Beauty, Teaching Assistant or Small Animal Care), were more likely to start on a lower-level qualification than they had previously held. Those who were on Access courses were more likely than those who wanted to progress immediately into work to have IA of gaining a higher qualification than they had previously held. However, the majority of these Access learners[86] spoke about how they were prepared to complete a lower or equivalent level qualification than they already held, so that they could gain access to the course and subsequent employment that they aspired to. **Toni's** situation characterised this well; she explained that even though she already had an equivalent Level three qualification[87], she had:

> Looked at the University website and from the requirements on there, they are quite specific about what qualifications you need. Although I have my BTEC National already, I don't think it is of too much benefit If I want to get into nursing. (Toni).

[86] Seven out of nine.

[87] BTEC National Diploma in Performing Arts.

This suggests that learners' initial aspirations were aligned to the qualifications they needed to get in order to address the aspirations gap, regardless of whether they were higher or lower.

Learners tended to discuss the ***instrumental aspirations*** of qualifications and work in tandem, but they were much more likely to focus on the aspirations gap related to work than qualifications and what this could mean in terms of financial security. **Sarah** (a single 25-year-old Access student), illustrated this point:

> I've always wanted to go to University, it had always been a dream. But, as well, I want some financial security. (Sarah).

Some students with children gave similar responses, but they tended to focus on how being financially better off would benefit their families too. This seemed to be particularly pertinent for single parents, who shared that they aspired to:

> Bettering myself, to make a better future for my daughter as well. And I just want to do the best I can financially. (Andrea).
>
> Get my education, get my experience, everything, and then a couple of years down the line, just open up a little place of my own. (Safina).
>
> Obviously, first of all I want to – need to get a job. (Fazia).
>
> I am older now and I have got a little girl. I don't want her to do what I done…. Obviously, you got to get a job and go to work. (Kathleen).

I have suggested here that aspirations to gain employment reflect the desire be better off financially, but, as I discuss later, aspirations around work can also have a vocational, practical and social basis.

Some participants' IA could be described as ***vocational aspirations*.** This was expressed in two key ways: either as 'wanting to give something back', or to train in a vocation they felt that they would be good at. There seemed to be a strong association between the vocational choice and the ways that they expressed their aspirations. Respondents who were hoping to enter caring or teaching professions were more likely to describe

their aspirations in terms of ‘giving back’, whereas those who aspired to work in hair and beauty, were more likely to describe their vocational aspirations in relation to skills.

For example, **Debbie** (Access to Health), aspired to become a physiotherapist, explained how she wanted to make a difference to others’ lives:

> People come in [to the shop] and you are the only one they speak to. It’s not got the same ring to it as helping someone who can't walk, getting them to take their first steps - something along those lines. (Debbie).

Other participants described how they had had long-held aspirations to help others, whether that be humans or animals. For example, **Kate**, had “always wanted to be a veterinary nurse, I just love helping animals”, and **Chloe** (Access to Social Science), claimed she wanted to be a counsellor because “I kind of always had a passion for people and helping others”.

Similarly, all the participants who had hoped to become Teaching Assistants (and maybe consider becoming primary teachers later), had strong IA of wanting to make a difference to children’s lives. The participants who were interviewed on this programme were already engaged in work experience within schools and therefore, it was not possible to determine whether these initial vocational aspirations had emerged or been strengthened by being immersed in the work. As **Jane** described, the volunteering that she had undertaken at her daughters’ school the previous year had influenced her aspirations:

> I found myself leaving my own child and reading with the child who never had parents. There was a child who was a refugee who didn’t speak much English and I felt looking through her records, she wasn’t having much attention from anybody - family or teacher. So, I found myself with her and I think that set the wheels in motion. (Jane).

A combination of having children at school and long held aspirations of doing a PGCE earlier in her life had influenced **Michelle's** IA. She described how she wanted to help because:

> There are so many children in dire situations, that school is such a 'safe haven', where they can get fed or warm and get some attention. Some teachers don't seem that bothered about it anymore. That is one of the reasons I really wanted to go into it. You look around and you think it's 'giving back'. (Michelle).

Precious, who was already working with children with special needs in a care setting (as a paid carer), described how she aspired to expand and enhance her skillset:

> I really want to change settings from care to a school. I like kids, I enjoy working with them and I am good at it. I love where I am just because I've spent a long time there [in her care role], but I thought I could change. Mostly, I wanted to do SEN schools with kids with learning difficulties - autism and things. (Precious).

What these examples of 'vocational aspirations' suggest, is that the conviction to 'help others' were not just long-held desires but also developed as a result of exposure to the vocational area in adulthood. Working in ancillary jobs (e.g., care assistants, voluntary work), being a recipient of services either directly (e.g., counselling/social work services) or indirectly (e.g., as a parent of a child at school), brought aspirations into view and the gap towards achieving them. Vocational aspirations which were formed as a result of long-held desires, seemed to be most evident in interviews with hair and beauty students, who described their aspirations in this way. **Jess** (a 34-year-old hairdressing student), explained:

> I decided I have always always wanted to do hairdressing. It was something that was in me – it wasn't something that my parents' thought was something that was good enough, so I never did it. Then when I had my son, I thought, 'I want to do it, I have always wanted to do it and I am going to do it'. (Jess).

As I will expand later in the chapter, Jess was describing that she had tried various work and courses in other vocational sectors, but that she had never felt fulfilled in the

ways that she had hoped hairdressing would make her feel. While **Kathleen** was returning to hairdressing having started but not completed a hairdressing course after leaving school, she told me: "I just enjoy doing people's hair. I had done it when I was 16 but I messed about*"*. In contrast to other respondents, their IA were not 'new'; although they had been formed recently, they could be described as long-held aspirations that were based on a vocation they already had an interest in – either because they thought they would be good at it or because they had a personal interest in the topic.

In sum, the term 'vocational aspirations' has been used to describe the narratives of learners who return to college with either a strong urge to make a difference to others' lives, or to fulfill their long-held aspirations. These aspirations are grounded in the sense that their vocational choice is something they were 'meant to do' or thought they'd be good at.

Some respondents expressed IA relating to improving their status and identity, which I have termed ***status aspirations***. To some extent, these related to instrumental aspirations, however, they were different in the sense that respondents were more emotive and specific about their aspirations to transform and improve their identity and status. For example, some women who were mothers, were keen to enhance their status by becoming a student. Amy (Access to Social Science) recalled a conversation with her daughter:

> I said to her 'Do you want me to be a mum who watches Jeremy Kyle all day?' I'm using that as an example – I can't stand daytime TV, it is not me. I have done staying at home. I don't mind being at home obviously, but I don't want to think that it is me, just a stay at home mum. I am a mum, but I am somebody else as well. (Amy).

Similarly, **Michelle** explained that her aspirations were partly instrumental (in terms of wanting to get off welfare benefits), but also:

> I sat there and thought 'Michelle you've got to do something, you can't carry on like this forever, just being a mother – you're better, you can do more with your life'. (Michelle).

A couple of others hoped that education would help them to progress beyond what they viewed to be a 'dead end' job, which they felt would also be a good example to their children. **Debbie**, who I introduced earlier, worked in retail and aspired to be a physiotherapist. She stated that since having her second child, she realised that:

> I don't want to work for the Co-op anymore. I did enjoy it and worked my way up. I did some brilliant jobs, but it has completely changed how they work now. I want them…my daughters…to be proud, as well as me being proud. I want them to know that I have pushed myself as much as I can. (Debbie).

Status aspirations usually occurred as part of a complex interaction between instrumental and vocational aspirations, and as I will discuss later in this chapter and the next, they emphasise the ways that gendered structures of constraint can shape women's aspirations.The aspirations of three students on the Teaching Assistant course (Jane/Michelle/Precious), were noteworthy because they seemed to be influenced by the practical considerations of fitting work hours and holidays around childcare, which I have termed **pragmatic aspirations**. **Jane** (aged 46) was changing career to become a TA following redundancy. Although this ultimately meant that she would need to take a lower salary, she rationalised that this sacrifice would be offset by being more available timewise:

> I started thinking, 'I wonder how much you get into working as a TA'. I could never do that because the pay is so much less than what am I am on but when you are working out the childcare, it is £60 a day in the Holidays for two children. I thought the Holidays would make up for it really, I won't be spending on childcare in the Holidays but it wasn't just that. (Jane).

Being present and available for childcare was important for **Precious** and Michelle too, who talked about their aspirations in very practical terms with childcare in mind:

> It would be easier because I would be at work when they would be at school. Then we would be at home at the same time, we wouldn't have to leave them and risk anything happening while I am not there. (Precious).

At the outset, **Michelle** had considered the possibility of completing a PGCE instead of or after her TA course, but decided that:

> Childcare would be a bit of a nightmare. Then it is the costing around the childcare. I would have to drop them off at before school club and pick them up later, I think it is such a long job. (Michelle).

Pragmatic aspirations were specific to those on the Teaching Assistant (TA) course, which is likely to relate to the fact that it gave women learners the opportunity to work family friendly hours in a role where they were able to 'help' children. This suggests that the aspirations of Teaching Assistants were simple, and yet they always combined with vocational and instrumental aspirations too. At the same time, I acknowledge that pragmatic aspirations could also be interpreted as having been shaped by complex gendered constraints (of care, work, time, norms and preferences) – a point I return to later in this chapter.

Language skills featured strongly as an initial aspiration for respondents who spoke English as a Second Language (ESOL). Although this was given higher priority for learners who were newly migrated, it was also a goal for those learners who had been settled in England for a decade or more[88]. Gaining language skills was obviously crucial for new migrants to overcome barriers such as not being able to gain a job. **Hoda** (an ESOL student), who had been a teacher before she had migrated to England from Pakistan, described:

[88] E.g., Nia and Precious, who were both continuing with their English studies.

> I am here because I want to improve my English, because I know I can get a job which I'm interested in, but the only barrier is English. (Hoda).

Migrants also spoke about how their initial aspirations to learn a language were strongly grounded in the desire to fit into society, which I have termed **integrative aspirations**. Fazia (a hairdressing student) explained how she had started her learning journey when she migrated to England after marrying her husband who lived here because:

> I decided because I know my family, they do speak the same language as me – Urdu. But when I go out alone in the shops or in the bank or somewhere out in the street, I couldn't speak. I can understand a bit [of English] obviously. It is different, it is not my first language and it was hard to speak up in front of the people. I decided I should have learned. Obviously if I was going to stay, it was going to be good for my future, so I started studying. (Fazia).

Similarly, **Tatva** (an ESOL student) who had migrated from Iran to marry her husband, explained that she aspired to learn the language:

> Because I want to be in society and be able to contact these people. I want to be able to speak with them. When I go to the doctors, I want to be able to say what my problem is and I can't answer them – I feel ashamed. (Tatva).

Integrative aspirations reflect an urge to 'fit in' to a new way of living, in which learners had become acutely aware in their new environment (aspirations window), of where they were and where they wanted to be (aspirations gap). And yet, Hoda's quote acts as a stark reminder that **integrative aspirations** can also be viewed from an alternative structural perspective— a point I return to later in this chapter when I consider the Structures of Constraint (SoC).

In this section, I have explored the types of ***initial aspirations*** (IA) that women learners referred to in their first interviews. This is important because it enables an analysis of the CTA to be made. While instrumental aspirations were central, learners held multiple initial aspirations which interlinked in complex ways, reflecting that

aspirations were broad and went beyond gaining a qualification and income. The categories presented here are not intended to act as typologies, instead, they aim to illustrate the multidimensional nature of initial aspirations found within the data. In what follows, I turn to consider how learners' initial aspirations have been shaped by their life histories and experiences.

A Fresh Start – How did I get here?

Previously, women learners' initial aspirations were presented separately, but it is important to recognise the ways that they are shaped by complex life histories and social influences. Next, I draw on Ray (2006) and Appadurai's (2004) concepts (which I outlined in chapter 3), to examine the ways in which present and past life experiences may have shaped their initial aspirations, and more specifically, the conditions under which their initial aspirations are formed. The aim of this section is to focus on the life events which participants credited with leading them back into FE, which were often discussed in relation to the ways that their earlier life experiences and life choices had shaped their educational trajectories and aspirations. Essentially, the findings are presented in chronological order, starting with the aspirations at the start of the course (initial aspirations), which are examined here in light of the events that had shaped their lives.

The life histories shared by the participants within the interview (and facilitated by the life grid), were diverse and complex, and yet respondents cited four key events/life experiences which prompted them to look out of their aspirations window, and subsequently develop initial aspirations which involved returning to FE. These will be discussed here individually. However, it is important to state that the key reasons for returning to FE were not always mutually exclusive – a point that was particularly evident for learners who had experienced multiple adversities. The 'life events' which stimulated the women learners in the study to return to education could be described as migration, broken lives, mental health and unfulfilled lives. As in the previous

section, the findings have been organised thematically. However, in order to provide adequate background of the complex factors which have shaped individual learners' initial aspirations (IA), it has been necessary to include longer narratives which are discussed individually and to summarise each theme.

Migration

Six learners in the study described themselves as migrants, the majority of whom shared initial aspirations to learn a language and integrate with a view to accessing paid employment. As the migrant learners revealed their biographies however, it became evident that they were not a homogenous group in terms of where they had migrated from, who they had migrated with and who they were going to live with upon arrival. Moreover, although these six women had diverse experiences of and reasons for migrating, returning to education appeared to be a crucial part of making a 'fresh start'. Broadly speaking, the emphasis placed on achieving ambitious educational aspirations was greater for those who had migrated alone or as lone parents, than for those who had migrated with a spouse or to get married to a British citizen. In what follows, I analyse these different experiences and suggest the ways in which they are likely to have influenced aspirations, noting that these are a small and diverse sample.

There were three women who could be described as having migrated alone (or as 'lone mothers'), but even within this small sample, this definition could be applied to a broad range of situations[89]. This group were interesting because they appeared to have the most ambitious aspirations gap which seemed to develop as they were exposed to education, work and through other social influences (e.g., their children's school/nursery/community settings). The three lone migrant learners seemed to be comfortable sharing their initial aspirations and talking about their future. However,

[89] For example, Nia migrated alone with her three children, Precious migrated alone and her children joined her later and Ana migrated when she was pregnant.

Precious and Nia[90] were reluctant to discuss the events which had led to their migration. I reflected that their hesitancy to answer questions about their previous life experiences might be related to traumatic or uncomfortable memories which they wanted to leave behind, as well as the cultural differences (ethnicity, race and migration status) between us.

Precious (aged 34), moved to England in her early twenties in 2005 on her own from Zimbabwe, and her young children joined her in 2009. Although her father lived here, she settled independently. When I asked Precious (as I had done with all the migrant learners) why she had migrated to England, she paused, and it was evident by the look of sorrow that crossed her face, that this question evoked painful memories. I reassured her that she did not have to answer any questions she did not feel comfortable with and could stop the interview at any time, but she said no – "I am fine – I just don't want to talk about that". Precious explained that shortly before her children had joined her, she started work as a carer[91] in 2009 while completing on-the-job training with the agency she was employed by. She described how her life changed when they arrived because she had to help them settle and this was difficult:

> My son, he got bullied when he first came here. They have been counselling him at school, but my daughter [who is younger] just picked up where she came from. (Precious).

She explained that a combination of wanting to help them settle in and put her life in Zimbabwe behind her, had prompted her to consider retraining. She said she had thought for a:

> really long time about what I wanted to do. I was confused for years. I thought I wanted to be a nurse or something like that, but I have done this [care work] for a really long time and I wanted a change….(Precious).

[90] Precious was from Zimbabwe and defined her ethnicity as Black African. Nia was from Nigeria and also defined her ethnicity as Black African.
[91] With children with learning difficulties and disabilities.

It was not until she met college tutors who were running an event at her daughters' school where she found out about the various opportunities for adult learning (including being a Teaching Assistant), that her aspirations window was broadened. She realised that she needed to: "just take English and Maths because when you start doing Level two in teaching and learning, you need that", in order to achieve her aspirations gap. This is where her journey towards her aspirations began.

Nia (aged 43) migrated to England two years before starting her Access course from Nigeria. She arrived alone with her three young children. She described that even though she did not know anyone when she arrived, she could at least speak reasonable English, having learnt it at school. Despite her reticence to answer questions about why she had migrated (changing the subject when asked about it), she was proud when sharing what she had achieved before leaving Nigeria; after gaining a HND in communications during her late twenties, she worked in the youth service and managed a local newspaper. Nia explained that she had never been interested in science, health or care, until she arrived in England and began to develop aspirations of becoming an adult nurse within the first couple of years of arriving. In order to be sure it was what she wanted to do, she explained that she:

> went for training first. I did my personal care training before I was involved in the setting…. When I see the residents and the nurses themselves, the way that they work - I have to make it better! (Nia).

Shortly after, she enrolled on the Access to Nursing course with the intention of progressing onto an Adult Nursing Degree the following year.

Ana (aged 29) had also migrated alone from Poland three years ago, while pregnant with her first child. Although she was going to live with her mother initially, this was intended to be short term. Unlike Nia and Precious, she spoke at length about the circumstances that led to her migration. Ana explained how she lost her father aged 13

in a tragic car accident, which left her mother in poverty and struggling to pay the rent. Her mother migrated to England with her younger brother to find work when Ana was 18, but Ana stayed behind because she wanted to complete her BA in Poland. Ana worked full time in Administration to fund her part-time degree in IT and Interiors, which she had been studying at the weekends for three and a half years. She explained that she did not finish because she had withdrawn from the course, saying “now I am really angry with myself”, but at weekends, he [her boyfriend] would say:

> Let’s do something different, and he kept telling me to give up. Day by day, month by month and year by year, so you just give up. Then it is too late, then I have to do something else and pay more and I haven’t got the money. (Ana).

Ana became pregnant shortly after withdrawing from university and had just moved in with her boyfriend, when she discovered he was an alcoholic. She did not share the precise details between receiving this news and coming to England. However, she disclosed that:

> he came back home drunk and so on, I would have to argue and so on. Police would come and everything started again. Do I want that life?! For me? For my baby?! (Ana).

Ana suffered from depression and was in hospital during her pregnancy before moving to England. However, she did not wish to discuss the issue further saying, “you know there is more to this story but I don’t want to go deeper with that”. She moved to England when she was five months pregnant and started a language course when her son was six months old. She was determined not to work in a “warehouse like other Polish people do, like my mum”, and to return to the admin career she had enjoyed in Poland.

These narratives suggest that for different reasons, these women had left their previous lives behind. There was a sense that they wanted to make a ‘fresh start’, not

only for themselves but for their children also. Pursuing an education was a dominant feature of their aspirations window which would lead to a new career or would enable them to access work that they had previously done. Each of them had, at differing paces, taken positive action towards achieving their aspirations gap using a combination of work, vocational education and language courses. I am not claiming here that their aspirations were formed and enacted independently of others or outside support, on the contrary, there was a strong sense that interactions in their new communities, schools, jobs and networks had positively influenced their aspirations.

The other half[92] (three) of the women learners who identified as migrants in the study, had migrated with other adults.[93] Of these, two migrated to marry a British citizen and the other one migrated with her spouse from Pakistan. These were an interesting group in that they had all left behind vocational specialisms they had been working and/or training in which they enjoyed, and two of the three were keen to return to the same or similar work as soon as they could. Compared to those who migrated alone, most of those who had migrated with others tended to be less positive or even neutral about how migration could enhance their individual opportunities outside of marriage. Like the other group (lone migrants), they were at various stages in their journey; two were on vocational ESOL tasters and the other was on a hair and beauty course. In what follows, I examine their experiences of migration and discuss the factors which had influenced their educational aspirations.

Hoda (aged 29), had completed an economics degree in Pakistan where she lived and worked as a primary school teacher before getting married there and moving to England with her husband shortly after. She told me that she came here because:

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[92] Fazia migrated from Pakistan to marry; Hoda migrated with her husband from Pakistan; and Tatva migrated from Iran to marry.

[93] With a spouse or to marry.

> It was about the marriage…because I married my husband, that is why I came here…I don't want to go into it too much here, but I did not want to go abroad…because I was happy there [in Pakistan] … Still, I think – why do people come here? I think they should stay in their countries if their life is safe. (Hoda).

Hoda explained that now that she has lived here for almost ten years, her views had changed:

> When you come here, you realise you get liberty, freedom and laws – rights. Then you can't go back and live there. (Hoda).

She was introduced to the college through her attendance at a stay and play centre when her children (now aged 6 and 8) were small, where she completed a basic ESOL course. She described that the friendships she had made through the centre and contacts she had made through her children's school, coupled with her prior experience as a teacher had been key to her aspirations to work in a school.

Like Hoda, **Tatva** (aged 38), left behind the career in Beauty Therapy she had trained for in Iran to migrate to England to get married and settle down six years ago. Tatva was accustomed to migration, having migrated from Afghanistan to Iran in early childhood to escape the conflict. In contrast to Fazia and Hoda, the way that she smiled when referring to her husband and how she excitedly shared that "he chose me", gave me the impression that she was glad that she had migrated. Her only mild regret was that she was keen to "mix with others from everywhere". Furthermore, she told me:

> I want to do more courses and get a job. I am interested in beauty and some salon subjects, health care, the body and nursing. I like meeting other women and making friends through my knowledge about beauty. (Tatva).

Although her initial aspirations reflected a commitment to integration, Hoda had set her sights on gaining further beauty qualifications and working in the beauty industry,

which she had "enjoyed very much". She was fully prepared to acquire citizenship and improve her language skills in order to do so.

Fazia (aged 30), was born in Pakistan and lived there until she married at age 17 and migrated to England to live with her husband. This was not something she chose for herself, recalling that at school, she had thought:

> I am going to continue my study and will be a doctor. Unfortunately, when I finished my school, I could not continue with my study. I had to get married because of the family process. (Fazia).

Fazia went on to explain how she felt about having to give up on her aspirations:

> It was hard for me, it was sad, but like in Pakistan, they don't speak like that [honestly] in front of their mum and dad. My dad affects my marriage, so I didn't say anything, so I just followed the line .... (Fazia).

Her quote suggests that she was somewhat reluctant to move to England, emphasising that only she and her sister (but not her brothers) had been expected to get married. Despite recalling that living in England was "okay at first", she went on to explain that once she came back to college, "hard life started", which ultimately resulted in her getting divorced (a point I return to later in the final section of this chapter). Education, migration and marriage were central to Fazia's story; marriage and migration had thwarted her ability to pursue her educational aspirations as a young woman, but since migrating, education expanded her aspirations window so that she could see what was possible for her to achieve and the route map to getting there gradually unfolded.

The cases in this category are diverse. Despite this, it was possible to see some patterns across the data. Those women who had migrated alone tended to have broad and ambitious aspirations, which reflected a desire to put the past firmly behind them and make a 'fresh start' for their families. In contrast to the other group (accompanied migrants), this group tended to have either been engaged in language studies and/or been in England for longer. Two thirds of the migrant learners had completed some

form of vocational education and worked prior to migrating. However, the accompanied migrants were more likely than the lone migrants to want to gain employment (or retrain) in their previous area of expertise. In contrast to the lone migrants, accompanied migrants were more likely to share that they had been reluctant to migrate and express their disappointment about leaving their previous work behind. In all cases, education was a theme that was central to their migration story; either because they needed to acquire language skills or because they were desperate to create a better life for themselves and their family. Finally, access to 'stay and play' centres, adult learning or third sector organisations in the community played a central role in helping these women to open their aspirations window and work towards their aspirations gap.

Broken Lives

There were a high proportion of women learners who shared how coercive control, as well as physical, sexual and psychological abuse perpetrated by their partner(s), had led them to want to engage in education. The term 'broken lives' reflects the extent to which abuse had affected them and how education was central to the process of 'rebuilding' their lives. The participants who endured abuse disclosed significant and harrowing details about the trauma they had experienced, which for some, had been a feature of most of their adult lives. Moreover, those who had received counselling were more likely to reflect on their early life experiences and how that had contributed to their life choices and educational trajectory. The themes in this chapter are cross-cutting and complex, meaning that the narratives presented here on abuse frequently co-exist with the themes discussed elsewhere (e.g., mental health, poverty, addiction and migration). This sub-section is not intended to present data related to every learner who experienced abuse. Rather, it focuses on four cases to illustrate those whose aspirations had been most shaped by the harrowing nature of abuse, and how for some, education offers hope and a 'fresh start'. The details provided by the participants within the interviews were not only delicate, but also extensive, complex

and non-linear, which meant that is has been necessary to present a considerable amount of background information compared to some of the other sub-sections.

Kathleen (aged 29) returned to FE with the initial aspiration of becoming a hairdresser, a course she had started and not completed when she was 16. Kathleen had missed much of her education, explaining that she went to primary school while living in the 'settled community' until she was 9 or 10, when her family who were Irish Travellers:

> moved back out to travelling again……we went up and down the country thousands of times, every week we would be moving, they [local authorities] would move us on every week.

It was not until her mother died *of a respiratory condition* (at aged 42), that she returned to the settled community. She told me how:

> We travelled up until my mum passed away, so I was about 15 or 16. It was a shock, it was sudden as well. We weren't expecting it…. We didn't know she had problems, she just went to sleep and never woke up if I am honest. (Kathleen).

Kathleen recalled that her father moved back to the area and brought a house to 'settle' in, but that she went straight into foster care (along with some of her six siblings [3 sisters and 3 brothers]). When she moved out of the care system and into her own flat, she went back to college to do a hairdressing course but explained that she didn't exactly stick to it – "I was a bit wild!" Kathleen described that at age 25, she had her daughter shortly after meeting her ex-boyfriend:

> I am not with him anymore…we broke up two years ago…I got rid of my ex because I was in a bit of a violent relationship. I got an order [restraining] out on him and then I moved house. That was only last year, I got my life back and thought I need to do something, so I just decided to come back [to college]. (Kathleen).

Kathleen explained that she moved (eight miles across the city) to get away from her ex-partner, and also to be closer to her family because:

> It was just me and her for four years…I have stayed at home for four years and I didn't do nothing. Then you become isolated don't you? (Kathleen)

She explained that she had regrets about not having completed her hairdressing course earlier and "wish I could go back really, it would be nice if I could go back and be sixteen again". Her aspirations window was opened by a combination of wanting to put her previous relationship behind her and looking ahead to the future when her daughter would be at school, which prompted her to consider returning to college. Kathleen was very aware of her aspirations gap. She moved closer to the college which offered the course she wanted to do as well as a nursery, in order to give herself the best chance of achieving her aspirations

Andrea (aged 34) had taken some time out of work after what she described as a very stressful period both in her job and personal life. It was during this time that she developed initial aspirations to be a dog trainer and joined the small animal management course. She explained that she needed:

> To have a dog and when he barks and scares people off. But then I got interested in the behaviour and why they do things in training. (Andrea).

Andrea revealed that she had lived in fear of her ex-partner after she found out he was a 'lunatic', when he was violent towards her while she was pregnant with her daughter (now aged 9). She told me:

> Then you realise you've made a mistake. I was very happy to have a baby and overjoyed to be pregnant, but just not by him. (Andrea).

She explained that she left him when her daughter was six months old, which she planned during her pregnancy. Since then, he has been in prison where he makes threats to her. She told me that:

> We have been through hell. But I am hoping that he has calmed now after a long period in jail [as] he wants a relationship with his daughter which I am reluctant about. (Andrea).

Andrea described that the fear she had lived with had taken its toll on her mentally but was philosophical about the experience of having had "a bad relationship, I think in the

end that has empowered me to be better". Andrea's determination to protect her and her daughter from abuse when her ex-partner was released from prison had been central to her decision to get a dog, which ultimately brought aspirations into view where she could learn to train dogs so that she could protect herself and others. Importantly, this offered her a completely 'fresh start', which brought new possibilities into view such as having skills which would enable her to relocate to Scotland or Canada, thus putting distance between her present life and the one she aspired to.

Jackie (aged 42), came to Adult College in 2014 to do some short courses after she was discharged from a mental health unit. Jackie described how coming out of hospital acted as the most significant reason for making a 'fresh start', but her biography suggested other complex factors such as having been the victim of rape, physical and psychological abuse within her relationships, alcoholism and temporary incarceration which had also influenced her return to college. Jackie described how she had been an alcoholic[94] for much of her life with a tendency to relapse at certain points. She told me that she got married to a man who had been a friend, who had been "Mr Nice", but "not been a nice person". She reflected how:

> emotionally, the bashing I had had from being with my ex-husband ground me down mentally, but I hadn't realised because I was that busy. (Jackie).

Jackie described that at the time, she "was trying to create a stable future for her young daughter" (now aged 18) after her divorce. She had embarked on hypnotherapy training to add to her portfolio of holistic therapy qualifications with plans to open a natural healing centre. However, she went on to explain that shortly after "… I met him [partner] and it dragged me down with it", which thwarted her aspirations because:

> I was in a violent relationship and there was other stuff going on and I couldn't go into work with black eyes. So, it all went out of control.

[94] In and out of recovery.

Luckily, I stopped it myself and ended it. But that was the right thing to do. (Jackie).

When I asked her to clarify what she meant by "dragging me down", she told me that the abuse had led to "desperate drinking", which she explained was compounded by a long wait for a referral for rape counselling. During this period, Jackie "kept getting arrested" and spending periods of time in a secure mental health unit, but it was not until she received counselling that things improved:

I never looked back and I knew I wouldn't if that makes sense. I had fallen out with myself and until I connect with me, the part of me that was wrong – the part that drinks… I hadn't listened to that part of me for that long. I knew I needed to reconnect and I did the first session. (Jackie).

As part of her recovery, Jackie was encouraged by her counsellor and support group to consider coming to Adult college to do some free one-day taster courses. At that point, she did not have any specific aspirations but with the support of her tutors, she gradually started to look forward and consider going to university to do a degree.

Like Jackie, **Safina**[95] (aged 47), had returned to FE after the breakdown of her second marriage. Safina recalled that she knew about her first marriage at age 13, after her mother returned from Pakistan and told her:

'you're engaged' and 'I said okay'. That was it. I could not say yes or no, so mum and dad decided, and I just followed that. (Safina).

Aged 17, she travelled to meet and marry her fiancée who was 18/19 years her senior, returning to England alone to live with her parents when she was three months pregnant with her first child. After having her daughter, she worked in a local factory as it was "her job to send money out to him" so that he could satisfy immigration criteria and get a visa. She described how he was "verbally abusive", which worsened after he had acquired his visa and she had her second daughter:

Things start looking a bit dark then because he blamed me, and I believed him that it was all my fault that I had a daughter. Because they are

[95] Safina was born in England after her parents migrated from Pakistan.

> uneducated people that is the way I see it…. Just before my second daughter, I got battered, everything went wrong and he walked out. (Safina).

She explained how her mother was caring for her grandmother at the time in Pakistan, but her father helped her bring up her two daughters and encouraged her to either work or go back to college. Safina went to her local college to do mechanical engineering which she enjoyed, and proudly spoke about being “awarded a medal by an [local female] MP no less”. She then started work as a power press operator. When she was 27 years old, Safina was introduced to her second husband (who also lived in Pakistan) through family friends, explaining how:

> This was becoming the worst, you’ve been through the worst already. I could not understand it was very abusive again…. The family said I was not educated, I was in a circle who would say I was ugly or fat…. My self-confidence literally went down. I would do everything to make him happy. You know, tried to be the perfect housewife. He was very abusive, beating me up and everything. (Safina).

During a visit to Pakistan with her son (aged 2 at the time), while she was in hospital, she explained that the doctor had told her that the family had asked him to “knock her out”. She overheard them saying, “I have got the lad here and her passport, so just waiting for a bit more funding to come through. Finish her off and let her family know what has happened to her”. After her discharge from hospital, she explained that they took her son away from her and hid him, meanwhile:

> He would put a gun to my head and say, ‘If I was to pull this trigger what would you do? You can’t do anything can you?’ There was so much going on, they battered me, drugged me on sleeping tablets and raped me. See they put cigarettes out on my arm and slashed my arm – see you can look and see them. (Safina).

Eventually she returned home with her family, and soon after her second husband got his visa, they were able to divorce. She explained that the events leading up to this point exacerbated her depression, which she believes was compounded by suffering

from chronic pain syndrome (as a consequence of fibromyalgia[96]). Safina told me that counselling had helped her to “come out of the house” after going into “a black hole again and became suicidal and everything”. Safina had returned to education to rebuild her life after her second divorce, describing the college as a “comfort zone” where she had started to develop a new life for herself.

The distressing narratives presented here reveal the complex layers of trauma and adversity which led these women learners back to college. Despite the diverse experiences of the women learners in this sub-section, this seemingly heterogenous group shared some commonalities in the sense that they developed educational aspirations as some of the first tentative steps towards achieving bigger life changes. The data seemed to suggest that there were two starting points where educational aspirations were either viewed as part of the journey to recovery and transformation, or a route towards long-term safety and security. Those learners who had returned to education after a previous abusive relationship, had an aspirations window that was half open. By that, I mean that they (Safina and Jackie) were aware of the potential that education could offer them in making a new start, at the same time, these learners also had access to counsellors who were likely to have supported them to look forward and develop aspirations for their lives. And yet, there were other learners who still feared for their safety and had taken quite drastic action to escape their abusers; they had either moved so that they could start a new life in which education was a central part or were gaining an education with a view to moving away. In what follows, I shift the focus to consider how educational aspirations were developed specifically in response to mental health difficulties.

[96] A medical condition that causes pain in the muscles and surrounding tissue, headaches, brain fog and extreme tiredness.

Mental Health

Almost half of all the participants disclosed that they had experienced mental health difficulties prior to or during their course. This ranged in severity from mild anxiety and depression to being suicidal or sectioned under the Mental Health Act. Mental health issues frequently intertwined with other factors such as caring responsibilities, marriage difficulties, abuse (of all kinds) and migration, in complex ways. Although mental health issues featured in a high proportion of the life histories[97], I focus here on three narratives where I consider mental health to be one of the central reasons for returning to education. As with the previous section on broken lives, mental health can be considered a substantive catalyst for starting again.

Emma (aged 27) explained that she failed her A levels at sixth form, because of "family stuff at the time, with my dad and stuff like that and just weren't bothered". Despite this, she secured full time employment and shortly after, gained employment in a blue-chip company where she worked for six years until she:

> Went through a bit of a mental crisis, so I went through a bad time. My nana died and just stuff happened, so I stopped working. (Emma).

Then she disclosed that she had been on medication after having been:

> Put in a mental hospital as well, I were in there for a few months, I have got personality disorder and depression. (Emma).

Emma explained that she had always had aspirations of working in the field of social work, in the background with "people who have had problems and they can't get out, you know, on a more higher scale than a carer". Despite having developed fairly clear aspirations while she was on the Level 2 course, Emma described how she had

[97] See Jackie, Safina, Andrea, Precious and Ana in the previous sub-section. Mental health also features in Collette and Sarah's narratives in the following sub-section.

"applied [to do the course][98] the year before but started the year later…. I don't think personally I were ready". She told me that her mother had also returned to education as an adult:

> starting off on an education course … she just went up and up, carried on for years doing education…she has got loads of letters after her name and stuff! (Emma).

A combination of her mother's encouragement and finding that her medication only stabilised her mood, meant she needed to "do stuff to keep my mind occupied, but getting out and things like that have completely helped'. Thus, for Emma, her aspirations window started to clear as she felt better and that was central to her recovery.

Amy (aged 40), left school at 16 and completed a YTS in retail on "rubbish money". After the two-year scheme finished, she was not offered a job. She took the opportunity to go back to college to do a nursery nursing course but was in a violent relationship – "I didn't' feel I was in the right place to be around children" and so left after a year. She tried to return after having her first child at the age of 23, but explained how at the time, she was "in a violent relationship at the time…. Again!" She attempted the course one more time at the age of 25 but got pregnant with her second child when she met her husband. Amy explained that she thought her depression and anxiety started after she had suffered post-natal depression, following the birth of her second child who was born with significant health problems[99]. Once her son was better, she was keen to stimulate her mind and started a counselling course. After the birth of her third child, she started to experience chronic pain, headaches, tiredness – which she explained:

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[98] Access to Social Studies at Northern College.
[99] Requiring frequent hospitalisation and operations.

> I put a lot of it down to family life. I have got three children by then and obviously, one on the autism spectrum and one yet still undiagnosed. But I was in pain constantly every day…. I got diagnosed with Fibromyalgia and arthritis. (Amy).

As her condition progressed, walking and sitting became uncomfortable. Amy described how she felt that she had "become unemployable in a sense". She described that her support worker who was helping her with her depression, told her she needed to get out of the house and suggested short courses at Adult College. She told me that she was reluctant because of her disability and mental health problems had knocked her confidence, describing how:

> I thought I wasn't fit to get back into education because my mind wasn't working. Then one day somebody from the college came to the women's group…said 'look at these booklets… pick a course'. I said no, but they organised a day trip up here…. The day I came, I didn't want to come. Then I did a course and got the Adult College bug – I just kept doing courses and stuff. (Amy).

Despite having had strong educational aspirations in the past and returning to college at significant points in her life (e.g., after each child), her aspirations window was firmly closed. She suggested that her health made her reluctant to consider it. However, encouragement from others and engaging in a number of short courses had helped to broaden her aspirations window, to the extent that she had progressed onto an Access course with a view to going to university with aspirations of becoming an Educational Psychologist.

Like Amy, **Chloe** was an Access to Social Studies student at Adult College. She explained that she had initially come to Adult College to do some short courses (3 years ago) and "to get me out and improve my self-esteem and confidence a little bit". When I asked her about why she had chosen to start with a course on managing anxiety and depression, she explained that it was:

> Originally it was for self-interest and to get myself out of depression and anxiety. I kind of got the bug a bit and started to believe in myself a bit

> more. I started to have ideas that I could do what I had thought about doing years and years ago. (Chloe).

She told me that she had "already knew quite a lot about it because I had been through a lot of groups and CBT therapy…but again it was to be around new people". Chloe went on to disclose that she had been affected by depression and anxiety her whole life, describing that it had started at school where she felt that she had "never felt like she fitted in at school" and experienced "school anxiety", which she attributed to missing school due to illness[100]. Depression and anxiety had continued into adulthood; she described how she had a "big episode of depression … I couldn't leave the house. I would sit in all day'. A few years later, after having her second son, she explained how she had "became more manic" which resulted in her "isolating myself from everything". Chloe disclosed that she felt a combination of suffering ongoing mental health difficulties, marriage problems and debt, as well as always wanting to return to education but had:

> put it on hold for the family. But because the relationship at the time was quite a controlling relationship, obviously that made my anxiety and depression a lot worse. (Chloe).

She explained that she had been unhappy in her marriage for 7 years with her husband, who she described as "selfish, aggressive and controlling", but was reluctant to leave because of her "strong Christian faith". However, Chloe explained that her depression and anxiety worsened when her husband could no longer work because he had developed a chronic disability. It was at this point that she returned to education and having done a number of short courses, she described how her aspirations window had broadened so that she not only considered doing a Level 2 qualification but had also left her children with her husband part time and lived at the College to do so. She credited this opportunity to pursue her aspirations with expanding her aspirations window further, and with helping her to be brave enough to leave her husband and start again.

[100] Wilm's syndrome a childhood cancer.

It is important to acknowledge that the cases presented here are diverse, and these students were interviewed after they had been at the college for at least a year on a range of introductory or Level 2 courses. And yet, they all explained how they had returned to college at a crisis point and their narratives suggested very little evidence that they had formed clear aspirations at that point. Rather, they were encouraged to engage in FE initially by their mental health support network, and in the case of Adult College, they had enrolled upon specialist introduction courses (and support) as part of their therapeutic recovery. These learners were starting off from the perspective of "needing to do something" (Emma), "get my head straight" (Amy) or "getting out of the house" (Chloe), but a blend of being engaged with education and becoming mentally stronger had helped them to develop their 'capacity to aspire'. There are parallels between some of these cases and those in the previous section on the need to make a 'fresh start' after migration or abuse, and yet what the findings in this section suggest, is that even when combined with other factors (e.g., abuse/grief), long term mental health difficulties can have a significant impact on an individual's capacity to aspire.

Unfulfilled lives

More than a third (8) of the participants broadly described how they had formed educational aspirations in response to feeling unfulfilled in their current situation, and formed the largest group in this category. They expressed feeling unfulfilled in various ways but mainly in relation to work, education or their role as a mother/carer, in some cases it was a combination of all three. This group were more likely than the previous groups[101] to be returning to education for the first time since leaving school or university, and more likely to be in settled relationships/married.[102] In contrast to the other categories in this sub-section, these participants were much less concerned with

[101] Especially 'broken lives' and 'mental health'.
[102] 6/8 were married or cohabiting, 2/8 were single.

making a ‘fresh start’ or having a ‘clean break’ and more focused on looking ahead. I am not suggesting that some learners were not regretful or frustrated, on the contrary, this group reflected at length about how they had not fulfilled their educational or work aspirations sooner. In what follows, I present the data about how their family values, education and work experience had led them to this point.

Toni (aged 28) made the decision to do the Access to Nursing course while she was on maternity leave from her role in the ambulance control centre. She explained how she started working for the ambulance service (where her dad worked) after a spinal injury, which meant that she could not pursue her aspirations to become a dancer after completing a Performing Arts course in FE at 18. She met her wife in the ambulance service, and they relocated to the area, so that they could be near her in-laws while her wife retrained to become a doctor. Although she enjoyed her job with the Ambulance Service, during her maternity leave, she described thinking:

> Instead of sitting there [at work] - it is not a dead-end job and I enjoy it, but there is nowhere I can take it now other than what I am doing, unless I want to go into management. That doesn't interest me, to be honest. (Toni).

Toni reflected that her maternity leave had afforded her the time and space to be able to reflect on her future, she explained that she had been inspired to return to education having watched her wife retrain to become a doctor. She stated that this was “now my time to study and we are thinking of having another one – which my wife will have”.

Like Toni, **Debbie** who I introduced earlier, had been working in retail for twelve years in a job which she described as having “taken her as far as she could go”. Her aspirations to work in health care could be traced back to her school years which she described as “awful” where “if you were quiet you just got left”. But an interest in healthcare combined with not “wanting to end up like my mum” (who was a struggling

single parent), drove her determination to succeed. She told me how she was average in everything but managed to get 10 GCSEs, which she attributed to “the fact that I revised every single night”. Debbie explained that this would be her second attempt of going back to university, having completed a BTEC in Health and Social Care at 18 and then moving away to university to start a BSc in Radiotherapy. She told me that:

> The course definitely wasn’t right for me. But I was told a lot you won’t be able to do it [by her mum], I think it impacted on my belief that I could do it. Before I went to university, I thought I could do this, I have got in so I can do it. But being told you can’t, you start to believe what they tell you. (Debbie).

Debbie had regrets about leaving nine weeks after starting her course saying, “it was stupid … I regret not pursuing it straight after”. But Debbie explained how a combination of factors had opened her aspirations window:

> I don’t want to work for them [retail organisation] anymore. I am not getting any satisfaction from it. I had my second child…I became part time after having my second child. So, realising we can manage on his full-time wage and my part time wage, got me thinking. Then once I saw someone who I did the access course, so she was telling me about it. I spoke to my husband, he said go for it, you’ll be able to do it. It was a combination of it all really, wanting to do it and being unhappy at where I was. (Debbie).

Debbie’s life history revealed how a career in health care had gone from the central focal point within her aspiration window in her late teens, to lying dormant after deciding that the aspirations gap was too wide (or off target) for her to reach at that point. Debbie’s narrative illustrates how, under the right conditions and with adequate social support, dormant aspirations can come back into focus.

Jess (aged 34), who is a mother of one, described how this was the second time she had returned to education as an adult; she started a Social Work degree at a local university when she was 27, but “didn’t like it all”, and withdrew after the first year. She explained that her parents (who were professionals), had always been keen for her to go to university so that she could get a “good job and I was more probably doing it for my parents”. As I explained earlier, Jess had worked since leaving school in

various hospitality and service sector jobs, and after withdrawing from university, just "did bits of work, tried to find work. I would be signing on, then I would get agency work which would only last a few months". This continued until she had her son, and she explained that "I stayed at home for two years…wanting a job but I couldn't really get a job". Like Debbie and Toni, her decision to return to college arose from a combination of taking time out of work to raise her son and feeling as he got older, that she wanted to work, but could not and did not want to go back to similar precarious work. At the point when she could access nursery funding, she chose to return to college which as I referred to earlier, had been an aspiration in her peripheral vision for most of her adult life.

Jane and Collette's situation was slightly different in that they had felt unfulfilled in their jobs but had been reluctant to leave for financial reasons and having their contracts terminated left them having to decide what they were going to do. **Jane** was made redundant from her role in a textiles company and she told me it:

> was a very negative atmosphere to be in but I didn't feel I could change, so when there was yet another round of redundancies coming. My gut reaction was I hope it is me. (Jane).

I outlined earlier how the potential of becoming a TA had first come into view in Jane's 'aspirations window' while she was volunteering and feeling dissatisfied with her job. These two factors seemed to combine in a way that prompted her to consider making a 'fresh start' in a completely new role.

Similarly, **Collette** (aged 33), who was working in an office, described how after an accidental breach of confidentiality, she was sacked having become "really complacent. Boredom — it was boredom for me". She explained that she regretted not knowing what to do after leaving school, "I trailed my feet", and had thought about doing massage after somebody suggested she had "healing hands". Although she told me that she was "a bit sceptical about it", she started to look into massage

courses but did not want a "dead end job" with no progression. Therefore, she considered the possibility of becoming a physiotherapist, but could not return to full-time study because:

> I had my mum's mortgage to look after. I were thinking I would not be able to pay the mortgage if I came and did full time education. So, I can't see me doing this…Then I got sacked. So, I thought, 'if there is any time for me to change my job it was going to be now'. (Collette).

Like Jane, Collette was dissatisfied with her job but her exit from the company was more abrupt and not the way she would have chosen to leave. However, despite it leaving her feeling "lost with everything that was going on as well. Being sacked knocked my confidence ten-fold'", it gave her the impetus to pursue her aspirations window which had, until then, been peripheral to the financial responsibilities that she had at the time. It is important to add that her circumstances changed, and she was able to adjust financially in order to pursue her aspirations.

I am more than a mum or carer

There were a couple of participants who explained that they had worked since completing their post compulsory education but chose not to work and "stayed at home" after having children. It is important to note that these participants were not the only mothers who had spent an extended period at home to look after children, however, they referred to this as being one of the primary reasons why they had chosen to return to education. This group expressed how they had started to think they could be more than a mum, or were bored, and so they looked for things to fill their aspirations window.

Kate (aged 33), and a mother of four children (the oldest aged 17 and the youngest aged 5), had moved to be near her mother and in a "*better location to bring the kids up"*. In her youth, Kate had moved away to pursue a Blacksmith course but found getting work "quite hard obviously for a girl", so moved into equine grooming in a race

yard. She had her son at aged 17 and knew there was "no way I was going to get a farrier apprenticeship once I was pregnant". Therefore, she trained to become a Horse-Riding Instructor but never worked in the field unfortunately because she got married (then divorced), had a further child and worked instead (in a wide variety of jobs). Kate explained how she settled and gave up working once she remarried in her mid-twenties and had two further children. She described that her aspirations window had been opened by "being bored" since moving locations. She explained how a combination of feeling "like I had spent the middle period of my life raising children" and her mother's influence, had broadened her aspirations window:

> My mum says you are not stupid Kate, we come from a family who has been successful in our own field. I suppose you could say, she has always … I don't know whether she looks at us [me] with disappointment sometimes. (Kate).

Kate was describing how her mother returned to education while she was younger and now holds one of the most senior positions in the NHS, having recently achieved a PhD. She explained how the combination of having had her sights set on working with animals since she was younger, being inspired by her mother's achievements (and to some extent feeling inadequate compared to her), and not wanting to have her "goals intertwined with the children", had broadened her aspirations window.

Michelle (aged 31 and a lone mother of three children), returned to college to do a course with aspirations of becoming a Teaching Assistant. Michelle's father, whom she described as "a very successful and work focussed structural engineer", brought her and her two sisters up alone after her mother left. She graduated in Politics and International Relations aged 21 and aspired to become a teacher but needed to gain a GCSE in Maths. After leaving university, Michelle became a full-time retail manager in the company she had been working at part time during her degree. She carried on working there full-time after her first child but was made redundant after her second child and explained that "we were able for me to stay off. So, I stayed off". She

enrolled on a Maths GCSE course in order to gain access to the PGCE which she achieved. However, becoming pregnant with her third child thwarted her plans to start her teaching qualification because:

> I was going to go back to uni full-time one year and obviously having a degree it would take me a year to do – bish, bash bosh it would be done. Obviously being pregnant with my youngest, the plan changed. (Michelle).

A combination of having a third child and being separated, along with having to move out of her rental property, narrowed her aspirations window from teacher to TA. She explained how her decision to return to college this year "was very impulsive", based on thinking "I have been involved in it once before, so I rang up and started the next week", and was shaped by a strong desire to prove that she was not "shy of work".

Relatedly, **Sarah** (aged 25), an Access student at Adult College, had been partially responsible for caring for her siblings since she was 13[103]. Despite "excelling academically" at primary school and being "in top sets for everything [at secondary school]", she explained that she had missed much of her schooling. Consequently, she was moved to a Pupil Referral Unit and explained that she only did two GCSEs[104]. Sarah described how she had considered various university courses (history, medicine, teaching), but then it "fell apart because you need a lot of qualifications which I realised I wasn't going to get". Having been shown a brochure at the end of her secondary school years and told to choose from the vocational list, she applied for cooking and childcare and "I got on the child-care first". She started her three-year nursery nursing course at a local college, she explained that although she did well at Level 2 CACHE Diploma, she found the Level 3 more difficult, and attributed this to a combination of finding essay writing difficult and her care responsibilities:

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[103] The youngest was 6 weeks old and involved some overnight care while her mother was out, and her father was working.

[104] Achieving a GCSE grade D in both Maths and English.

> the second year of my Level three, my second niece was born, and my brother and his girlfriend didn't look after her at the time. So, I took on the caring role for her [for almost a year] as well. I missed a lot of time because there were a lot of sleepless nights because she was very young at the time. (Sarah).

After leaving college, Sarah continued to live at home and worked as a Teaching Assistant in a primary school on temporary agency contracts for five years. She told me that her decision to return to college centred around not "having money for extended periods of time". She explained that she moved out after an argument and how it had:

> It taught me that I needed to, if I couldn't afford to live on my own as a 20 odd year old. I needed to sort that, before I got to 30 or 40 and realised that! (Sarah).

A combination of not having fulfilled her aspirations of going to university which had "always been a dream" and needing financial independence and security from her family, led her to consider returning to college. Essentially, going to university had been in her peripheral vision as an aspirations gap, which she understood she could not fulfil because she had not met the entry requirements. However, having then completed GCSEs to make herself more employable, the aspiration gap started to feel more achievable.

Even though the women learners' aspirations in this category have been broadly shaped by feeling unfulfilled and needing change, the way that learners described their situation suggested that it had a slower, more considered tempo and was not as radical or urgent as those described in earlier sub-sections. Despite the diverse narratives presented here, there were some commonalities amongst them. Unsurprisingly, their need for change was centred on the activity that they felt they spent the most of their time doing. For example, those who were in paid work were more likely to feel unfulfilled as a result of the jobs they were doing; conversely, those who were not in paid work explained that they felt unfulfilled in their caring role and were keen to get into the workforce to gain some financial and personal

independence. A lack of fulfilment was frequently attributed to not having achieved their potential earlier in their education, or not having followed their goals earlier in life. As such, aspirations that had laid dormant or been in their peripheral vision for years, were brought into central view. The learners in this section tended to reflect at length about where they were now (feeling unfulfilled) and how they planned to achieve their 'aspirations gap'. The participants' narratives suggest that their aspirations were influenced by life changes (e.g., location, financial status, having new or additional care responsibilities) and importantly, some were influenced by others who had helped to bring their aspirations into view.

Gender and the SoC: What 'recent battles have I had to fight to be here'?

Thus far, I have outlined learners' initial aspirations and the complex ways in which life experiences and specific events have shaped their aspirations. This section focuses more specifically on the ways that the gendered structures of constraint (SoC) influenced women learners' ability to pursue their initial aspirations, noting at this point that the relationship between aspirations, Structures of Constraints (SoC) and agency not only featured at the outset but were also prominent throughout the study. In what follows, I use Folbre's (1994) key concepts of assets, rules, norms and preferences (outlined in chapter three) or what she refers to as Gendered SoC (which are mediated by age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class), to frame some of the structural barriers which women had to navigate in order to return to education. It is worth noting that although each of the SoC will be outlined on an individual basis here, they rarely occurred in isolation or at a specific point in time.

Assets

Folbre (1994) argues that the **assets** of time and money are a first order constraint, because without either, one cannot pursue their own life goal (1994, p.54). While most participants tended to foreground these constraints as their course progressed (see

next chapter), there were some for whom time and/or money could be considered a barrier to entry. I will draw on some of the narratives to reflect how access to, or control over, **assets** affected women's ability to pursue their life choices in specific ways. The lack of time (and money) was a barrier for a couple of lone parents (Kathleen and Jess), who described how they had wanted to study, but had waited for universal funding to be available. Jess described that:

> As soon as he went into nursery [a funded place], I just signed up for this course ...It gave me the time to do something [the course]. (Jess).

Similarly, Kathleen told me that she had been unable to return to college as soon as she would have liked because she could not access the childcare support:

> This college was miles away, there was no crèche [at my local college] and they couldn't fund the crèche when I went there. (Kathleen).

Kathleen was constrained partly because her daughter was too young for her to be able to access universal childcare support, but also because she could not afford to travel to college. She explained that:

> Over there it would have been a problem but here no – if I have got no money, I can walk to college, it is only twenty minutes. Well, I drive now but I could walk. (Kathleen).

Access to childcare funding seemed to be a barrier to returning to college especially for lone mothers with preschool aged children who had not (yet) returned to paid work. That is not to suggest that childcare was the only constraint these women had to overcome, or even that these learners considered it a constraint at all. This is further complicated by the possibility that decisions might reflect conflicted 'preferences' or ascribing to 'norms, as illustrated in the case of Jess, who told me how she had wanted to be at home with her son in the early years.

In the introduction, I suggested that it was more prevalent in the interviews with the Teaching Assistants (Michelle, Jane and Precious), for them to describe their initial aspirations in 'pragmatic' terms where they had chosen the course partly because they

wanted to work in a role which enabled them to be present for their children. Applying Folbre's (1994) lens to this phenomenon suggests that the constraints of time and money could have been a factor in their course choice, meaning that after the course, they hoped to be able to gain some financial independence and also be available to care for their children outside of school/work hours. As in the previous cases, it is important to consider the possibility that their choices were also shaped by 'norms' (motherhood) and 'preferences' (the tension between norms and their own desires).

While most women learners were able to access free tuition or an Adult Learning Loan, there were a few who had to leave their jobs (e.g., Jane and Collette) or work part time (e.g., Nia and Precious) in order to be able to study. As I will expand in the next chapter, the constraints on their assets put considerable strain on some of them, especially as they negotiated the competing demands of pursuing their own goals and managing their assets effectively.

Rules

Folbre (1994) argues that explicit **rules** (policy and legislation) can act as a gendered SoC or form of exclusion for some groups. As I briefly mentioned earlier, this affected migrant women learners' access to education in complex and diverse ways depending on where they were migrating from, how long they had been here, whether they had citizenship, their language skills and previous qualifications. Rules seemed to have the most negative effect on those migrants who had been in England for the shortest amount of time, and especially those who needed language skills (Hoda, Tatva, and Ana), which were vital for them to be able to gain employment and citizenship. And yet, Ana explained that although she did not have to wait, it had become increasingly difficult to get on an ESOL course because of long waiting lists:

> I was lucky I didn't have to wait [in 2014] but now a lot of people wait one year. Where I work, it is now October and we already got 5-600 people

> waiting for the next academic year. I think something happened after Brexit …. People want to learn to stay here. (Ana).

Moreover, having to wait to become eligible for course funding because of their migrant status[105] acted as a constraint. For example, **Hoda** explained that although she had been in England for some time, she had only been doing ESOL courses for the last year and could not work because:

> If the Home Office allows us to stay, because the Home Office doesn't allow us to work. These are two reasons why I can't get a job. If the Home Office gives us permission, then I will find something but hopefully I will be able to start working in a school. (Hoda).

This was less problematic for those who were from EEA areas (Ana) or were a spouse of a UK citizen (Tatva), in that they had to wait less time to access the course. Another significant way that **rules** shaped the SoC for some women learners was related to their previous qualifications not being equivalent[106], either to gain employment in a role they held before migration or to gain access to university courses. For example, Hoda told me that she could not access teaching because her degree would not be sufficient to do a teaching course, and Ana explained how her previous qualifications were not treated as equivalent in the UK. This meant for both of them, that they had started or planned to start working in lower-level employment.

Norms

The implicit rules of gender and cultural **norms** as a SoC were evident in a number of women learners' biographies, not only at the start of their course but as a theme

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[105] The criteria for funding eligibility for non-EEA citizens are complex: migrants must have permission granted to live in the UK and have been a citizen for 3 years; refugees can access funding immediately if they have discretionary leave, exceptional leave, indefinite leave or humanitarian protection; and asylum seekers can access funding if they have been in the UK for six months or are appealing a decision to grant asylum.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/414797/Funding_Rules_v2_March_2015.pdf

[106] Equivalent degree qualifications.

across their life course. Folbre (1994) argues that norms are not explicit but based on "common agreements or understandings that are not necessarily unanimous" (ibid., p.41) and therefore, they can be experienced differently and as I noted earlier, are difficult to conceptualise. However, they can be thought of as "the values, attitudes, preferences, conventions, assumptions, ideologies, traditions, customs, culture, rules, laws, beliefs, or even rights" (Pearse and Connell, 2016, p.34). Norms were most often referred to in relation to what was expected of them in the 'household unit'[107], which was the site of cooperation or conflict about issues surrounding staying at home, travel, migration, motherhood, work and study. In the following section, I outline how some women learners contested these norms so that they could pursue their own goals. That is not to suggest that every participant was conscious of, in a position to or even wanted to contest the 'norms' which constrained their goals and aspirations.

Preferences

Folbre (1994) describes **preferences** as what an "individual likes and how much" (ibid., p.41). She contends that they are influenced by social norms, assets and rules as well as learning (acquired tastes). She argues that preferences can act as a constraint when they conflict with each other e.g., the desire to study and also be available for their children (ibid., p.54). In differing ways, participants hinted how it had been necessary to resolve the tensions that they felt between these competing preferences. For example, the biographies of Jess and Kathleen discussed in relation to assets and norms earlier, suggest that they had competing preferences between being there for their children and wanting to gain an education. In contrast, there were two learners who expressed strong preferences and a determination to pursue their own goals, as well as wanting to be a 'good mother' (Debbie and Kate). At the outset, both remarked that:

[107] Or by close family.

> I don't see why you can't be a mum and have a career as well. I think if you show that, then they've got the option to do it and not be pigeonholed where you can just get a part time job in a shop. (Debbie).
>
> I feel like they are not baby babies, I feel that really, I should be able to start pursuing my own goals or my own path…. I will always support them, but part of me thinks that I want to do what I want to do. (Kate).

What these two learners seemed to have in common, is that they were both able to negotiate with and foster the support of their spouses. This suggests that their preferences were not only individual but were influenced by and took account of the household also.

This section has focused on the ways that some women learners experience and navigate the structures of constraint so that they can participate in education. Certain SoC, such as rules, appear to be quite difficult to overcome because essentially, they are controlled externally by legislation and the participants had no power to influence them. In contrast, *some* women learners seemed to have more agency over SoC related to assets (especially time), norms and preferences, which appeared to reflect the ways in which they engaged in cooperation and conflict in their personal lives to ensure that they could pursue their own goals. In what follows, I examine the ways that women learners used 'bargaining' to ensure that they were able to pursue their initial aspirations.

Bargaining and Agency

As I argued earlier (see also chapter three), some women learners engaged in a process of bargaining within their household (with the most significant people in their lives), using cooperation and conflict (as well as subversion, resistance, or persuasion) to overcome constraints on their goals and aspirations (Kabeer, 1999a). While some form of 'bargaining' occurred for most of the women learners at various times in their study (especially those who were mothers), there were a few for whom without

cooperation and conflict they would not have been able to start and/or continue their educational path. Participants who engaged in cooperation and conflict (bargaining) at the start of their course,[108] were most likely to do so in relation to the SoC of assets (time) and norms. Katz (1997) and Agarwal (Agarwal, 1997) insist that being able to 'bargain' is contingent on women having their 'voice' heard and being empowered to speak, as well as being able to 'exit' the situation so that they can follow their own goals if required.

A couple of participants had already navigated some of the SoC prior to coming back to college, and in some of these cases, this had influenced their aspirations to return to college. There were a couple of women (Fazia and Chloe) who described how the 'bargaining' that they had engaged in during their earlier courses (introductory/ESOL), had resulted in them choosing to 'exit' their relationships. For example, **Fazia,** who I introduced earlier, candidly recalled the conflict within the household while she was pursuing her language courses, saying:

> When I used to live with my in-laws, whenever like I need to go college – obviously you have things to do as well. You have to wake up early morning, if I started college at 9, I had to wake up at 5.30/6 to do housework first. Then get ready for the college and come back and do the housework as well. It was hard and if I don't do it, I will be in trouble because of the mother-in-law. (Fazia).

Fazia described how her own goals at the time were rendered invisible, as she was expected to fulfil the gender and cultural norms of the family. She explained that after having her daughter (a couple of years after arriving in England), she wanted to use her language skills to gain a job, but "my family wasn't letting me do the job…after six

[108] To clarify, even though this study focuses on the learners' present aspirations and experiences, it is important to acknowledge that some participants had been studying for some time (e.g., on language or introductory courses) and were referring to the ways in which they had used bargaining to pursue their own goal over time.

months I start having problems with my in-laws and I left the house with my daughter". (Fazia).

Similarly, **Chloe** explained that in the previous year, she had embarked on a Level 2 course at Adult College which involved staying at the college two nights a week. However, this arrangement had been met with resistance from her husband, she described how he "would argue about nothing", and that she would arrive at "college in bits, crying and shaking". She explained how:

> Education became a real problem because of the circumstances at home ... I took on the Level 2, but I think my husband at the time that I was moving away [from him]. I were able to get away from my husband and children and it gave me the opportunity to reflect on how things were at home … Once I became stronger, and I was able to leave that relationship. (Chloe).

She reflected that she would not have been able to pursue the Access course if she had not left him, because she would not have had the mental space to live with him and come to college to complete her course.

There were other less extreme examples of the cooperation and conflict experienced by some of the women learners in the study, especially in relation to norms. A couple of learners described how their choice to study had been criticised by parents (mothers especially), usually based on the fact that they were not conforming to gender and cultural norms. For example, Safina explained that:

> My mum [criticises] my choices [to do a beauty course] 'not with all this recession'. My mum would say, 'what are you going to college for, stay home to do this, do that'. (Safina).

Safina explained that she had decided that it was important for her to be able to pursue her own goals and recalled saying to her mum:

> Thank you, mum, but no thank you. I have had my fair share of playing the mother, I don't want to do that now. My kids have grown up, they can

> stand up for themselves. Why should I be waiting to feed them, I am not going to be feeding them when they can cook. (Safina).

Similarly, Ana described how her mother had tried to discourage her from doing the Business Admin Apprenticeship alongside her ESOL programmes. She told me:

> Even my mum said don't go part time with ESOL because you will work more than 30 hours, then you will have less time for Lukas [her son]. (Ana).

She went on to explain that her mother had not fulfilled her own ambitions of doing law and had instead moved to England and started working in a warehouse out of financial necessity. Ana explained how she felt like this was the cause of friction:

> I feel like she is proud of me because I achieved and sometimes, I feel like she is saying, 'don't do it don't do it [the course]'. (Ana).

Despite the conflicts she had with her mother regarding her course, work and childcare, Ana was determined to resist her mother's expectations that she should stay at home to look after Lukas until he was at school.

Some of the single participants who had previously engaged in caring for family members, explored the effort that they had put into ensuring they had space and time away from their unpaid care roles so that they could do their course. They tended to do this prior to starting the course. Collette described how she had had always done "easy jobs" to support her sister (who had addiction problems) and her niece, but she decided that it was not going to be an obstacle to her life goals any longer. She told me:

> We help my sister…she lives in my house. I decided if I were to support my sister constantly, what would my life be like? I would be someone else's dogsbody basically. Much as I love her, I have decided I am going to take control and do something I really want to do. (Collette).

Collette was so determined to achieve her aspirations, that she persuaded her parents to take over the responsibilities which she said, “freed me so that I can do what I want to”, without the added pressure of having to support her sister. Similarly, Sarah, who had spent much of her youth supporting her family as a carer, managed to cooperate with her family so that she was able to reduce care for siblings during the week, and only care for her niece on alternate weekends.

I acknowledge that the findings presented here only reflect those cases where women were explicit about having engaged in bargaining. At the same time, there were other learners who subtly implied how it had been necessary to negotiate with their spouses so that they had the freedom to attend college (e.g., Hoda and Tatva). Katz (1997) and Agarwal (1997) recognise that analysing ‘voice’ is problematic (who gets to bargain and on what grounds) because women may internalise norms in specific ways. Relatedly, the extent to which they engaged in cooperation and conflict can depend on whether they have ‘realistic exit options’ and know how to take them.

In sum, the findings discussed here suggest that there is a relationship between ‘voice’ and ‘exit options’; those who were in unhappy marriages who had failed to have their ‘voices’ (choices) heard, were more likely to use exit options to pursue their goals. In contrast, those in more stable relationships/marriages or those who were not dependent on others for direct support (e.g., Collette and Sarah), seemed to have a strong ‘voice’. As noted earlier, some of the women who had migrated, tended not to disclose whether they had been engaged in ‘bargaining’, which does not necessarily mean they had not been. Rather, it is possible that they avoided discussing it because of cultural norms.

Conclusions

Women learners' initial aspirations offers a useful starting point for understanding what their aspirations were when they joined the course. Although they tended to be aligned to the instrumental goals of policy makers, they were more complex and multidimensional than engaging in training to simply gain qualifications or a job. Aspirations were created in the present and are future orientated. However, they were strongly influenced by the past and importantly, they were often stimulated in response to a 'crisis' or chronic and harrowing personal biographies. As such, educational aspirations were formed as part of broader plans to make a 'fresh start' and lead more fulfilling lives. Women learners' narratives revealed how their 'capacity to aspire' had been influenced by various structures of constraints such as access to childcare, time, gender norms and expectations of others from the outset. To some extent, the women learners in this study had navigated some of these in order to participate in education using bargaining processes and acting in their own interests to varying degrees. And yet, there were others who had overcome significant constraints in order to participate in education, and returning to college was an act of resistance, subversion and agency. In the most extreme cases, they had chosen to leave difficult relationships so that they could engage in education.

Chapter Six – "Getting myself an education, but at what cost?"

Introduction

The data presented in this chapter reflects the second interviews which took place towards the completion of their course[109] and follow up communication with some learners. Essentially, having considered in detail why women learners return to FE and what their aspirations were at the start of the course in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses on their journey through education and the extent to which they are able to achieve their goals. This chapter is divided into three sections which are framed using the key concepts of aspirations, gendered structures of constraint (SoC) and agency which were outlined in the theoretical framework (chapter three).

The first section presents data on the extent to which women learners had the CTA and the ways that their aspirations are realised. The findings revealed that learners' aspirations and their journeys through education are far from static. Rather, they were constantly evolving and changing in relation to experiences and circumstances. The dynamic nature of aspirations was reflected in the ways that learners' initial aspirations were most likely to have either been expanded, adapted or constrained in some way. The second section explores the competing constraints which some women learners had to navigate in order to pursue their life goals. The diversity of the women learners in this study and their lived realities is reflected in their narratives about the constraints of work, care, time and money, as well as the tensions between norms and preferences.

[109] Course refers to their main learning outcome which was usually a year long programme (e.g., NVQ Level 1 in Hairdressing). On some courses such as Hairdressing, they were progressing onto other courses in the same area (e.g., NVQ Level 2) after the study.

Finally, the third section discusses what women learners gained from returning to college beyond their initial aspirations. It focuses on the ways that engaging in education had improved their 'sense of agency', confidence and well-being. These somewhat unexpected broader gains had benefitted not only them but their families also.

Aspirations: Bringing the future back in

Previously, I outlined five broad categories of initial aspirations which the women learners in this study held at the start of their course and examined the factors which shaped them. This section explores the findings of the second interview in which learners reflected on the extent to which they had met their initial aspirations and more specifically, their journey towards achieving their aspirations gap. Despite learner narratives being focused on the individual stories, there were commonalities across them and their aspirations fell into four main groups – achieved, emergent, expanded, or constrained. Although these groups specifically focus on the achievement of IA only, it must be noted that there were other gains such as their sense of agency, which I outline later in the chapter. In what follows, I outline these categories, noting that I will focus on the extent to which these reflect agency and structure later.

Achieved aspirations

Just over a third of the group achieved the initial aspirations they had described at the start of their course, which were characterised as having gained their qualification/s, access to the HE (further FE) course they aspired to, employment that was aligned to their vocational or pragmatic aspirations and/or achieving the status they had hoped for. Participants were only considered to have achieved their IA if their goals were fully met, and the majority of this group had successfully made the transition on to the FE or HE courses that they had aspired to and the others had progressed into work. More

specifically, Jess and Kathleen both progressed onto the next level of hairdressing; Debbie and Toni progressed onto their chosen HE courses; Tatva and Fazia achieved their qualifications and progressed onto the next level, and Michelle and Jane found work as TAs at the end of their course.

While the group who achieved their initial aspirations differed (in terms of their age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, migration and parental status), they shared similarities in the sense that they had clear route maps towards their aspirations, and they did not deviate from working towards meeting their aspirations gap. It is important to acknowledge that these findings reflect a particular point in time, and of learners' trajectories which may have shifted since the second interview. Furthermore, as most of the learners in this category were doing qualifications which were at a lower level than they had already achieved, it is possible that the initial aspirations given by learners at the first interview may have already been limited to a degree, thus making achieving them more realistic. Furthermore, as I outline later, those learners who achieved their aspirations were not immune from experiencing gendered SoC.

Aspirations are not static, linear or impervious to social influences. Rather, their dynamic and socially situated nature is evident from the majority of women learners' narratives who had either altered their goals in-between interviews in some way or had failed to achieve their aspirations gap. These changes can be characterised in three main ways where learners either expanded, constrained, or adapted their aspirations. The extent to which learners' aspirations deviated from their initial aspirations, were the main criteria used for selecting cases. In what follows, I expand on these three main categories in turn.

Emergent aspirations

A few learners described how their aspirations had changed since our first meeting or had evolved slowly throughout their study which I have termed 'emergent'. In contrast

to constrained aspirations or what might also be thought of as 'adaptive preferences', emergent aspirations are used to describe the cases where learners changed their goals for a similar outcome but in a different vocational area as new possibilities came into view.

Chloe explained in her first interview how she was hoping to do degree level study with the aim of becoming a counsellor. Chloe was aware that she would need to do this at post-graduate level study, and that there were numerous ways of accessing the profession, as well as the requirement to complete voluntary clinical practice. She explained at her first interview that she had applied to Northern [Russell Group] University for:

> Two degree courses, my first choice – dual degree sociology and religion (theology and the bible). Second one – psychology and counselling. I have seen a few other universities that offer behavioural science, mentoring and coaching. Then there's nothing specifically counselling [related] – so I am keeping my options quite open. I am flexible that it might change…So as long as I am studying people, I am alright. (Chloe).

By the second interview, Chloe had received two conditional offers from the local (post-1992) university, but these choices were dependent on her final two assignment grades. She said:

> I have applied for theology which is my first choice and it's forty at merit and fifteen at distinction, and then have also put in for sociology as my second choice which is I think is slightly more – 25 distinction and the rest at merit. (Chloe).

However, when I spoke to Chloe after she had completed her Access course, she explained that she had found a course that she felt was more suited to what she was interested in at a different university and had enrolled to do a BSc in Counselling and Mentoring.

Like Chloe, **Emma** had suffered mental illness and started her Access course with an interest in mental well-being with aspirations of becoming a mental health nurse. She

explained that having completed a placement for her Level 2 qualification in care the previous year, she had "changed my mind, I want to go into the administrative side, in the background really". She explained that when she went into her placement:

> At first, I don't think I would have been ready for placement [with mental health patients]. The applied social sciences [degree], I just found it by accident and thought it sounded really really interesting…Just like psychology, sociology is just different perspectives on life and why things work the way they work. (Emma).

As I explained in chapter 5, **Jackie**, an Access student at Adult College, shared how she had started the course after completing some Level 2 courses with initial aspirations of "going to uni". Even though she had explained how she had been working towards expanding her holistic therapies portfolio before becoming ill, she was less clear about what she hoped to study at university or do beyond it saying:

> I am going to see what comes up along the way, I don't have a clear when I leave university I want to do this [emphasis added]. I know it sounds daft, but I know that by the time I leave university, that I will have a much clearer idea of what I will be doing. (Jackie).

Despite this lack of clarity, she had at various points in both interviews suggested that she was interested in a course that would expand her skills in helping people therapeutically, which she felt she would be "good at" because of her experience in the field of holistic therapy. By the second interview, Jackie had applied to do a philosophy degree and had visited various universities, but still had no clear idea of what she was hoping to "do" after university. She suggested that her aspirations had emerged from gaining an interest in philosophy during her Access course and explained that she was fascinated by the teachers she had met at university.

Despite there only being a minority of students who had altered or adapted their aspirations during their study, they shared various commonalities in that they were all

white, on Access courses[110] and had a history of mental health issues. It is possible that the structure and content of the Access course was a factor, in that it gave learners who had tentative aspirations or who were uncertain of the route they wished to take but held aspirations of going to university, a degree of flexibility which was not always possible in other vocational routes. This flexibility was a key strength for those who were returning to college while trying to recover from mental health difficulties. It is possible that these learners' aspirations were changing dynamically as their health was improving.

Expanded aspirations

A small number of other learners (Andrea, Kate and Sarah) had not only changed their aspirations by the second interview but had expanded them as well. In each of these cases, they had returned to FE with specific and clear vocational aspirations, but a combination of gaining more knowledge and practical experience of the vocational areas along with realising that they were capable of achieving a higher level of qualification than they had anticipated, which led to them extending their aspirations.

At the first interview, **Andrea**, who was doing a small animal management course (at level 2) with aspirations of becoming a dog trainer, explained how these had changed. She told me:

> One of my ideas was to do personal protection, [I learnt] single-handedly using videos and books and things like that. But it is not something I'd want to do as a full-time career [now]. (Andrea).

Andrea explained that after submitting the first piece of coursework, the course tutors had moved her into the level 3 group which had prompted her to consider that she was capable of higher-level study. She told me:

[110] Access learners in the study sample were predominantly white (8/9), with only one learner who identified as BME.

> So, I'd like to do an influential job…. I am looking to relocate after uni as well…I will learn so much more at uni. I think I have got my academic sights back. Where before I wasn't very academic…. So, going back into studying, you have to learn how to write a report again and things like that… (Andrea).

With the support of her tutors at the specialist annexe facility, she decided to apply for an allied degree at the main campus, whose admissions staff she described as having been "really helpful actually". She explained that she had:

> I have been accepted onto the BA Animal Management course. I have actually got my sights on doing a Masters' Degree in Animal Science. But, [ummmm] they told me at my interview at main site to slow down….I have looked at one elsewhere too. I have seen some jobs that look quite good, that required you to have a Masters' degree. I have even looked at PhDs actually. I would never have thought about that before. I thought I'd go to college and that'd be it. But then when you are looking to where you can go and the job you can get, I don't see the point in stopping here when you can get up there! (Andrea).

Andrea not only had a clear idea of the route towards her aspirations and the aspirations gap, but she also had a "back up" plan if she was not able to achieve her ambitious goals. Her aspirations seemed to expand through a combination of increasing knowledge and experience of the vocational area, the learning environment, and supportive tutors, as well as her personal situation.

Similarly, **Kate**, who was on the Level 3 Small Animal Management Course, had also expanded her aspirations after being moved up from Level 2 at the start of her course and having completed her placement. Kate explained that since our first meeting she had:

> Decided that I don't want to do vet nursing. I did a stint in practice and didn't enjoy it at all…The reality was, I was in a room, a very small room for nearly eight hours stood up — watching various procedures taking place. When I actually managed to take a step back watching these ragged mostly women, trying to do a million things, I was just like, 'I do that at home'. I really wouldn't want to come to a workplace and do that on a daily basis. There were a few occasions when things happened that

> really upset me, you know, animals being put to sleep and things like that. (Kate).

She had sought the advice of various senior veterinary nurses and her tutor, who had told her that "'you have either got to harden yourself to it or it is not the job for you, because when you have another one [animal] coming in in five minutes, you can't sit and cry about that one', kind of thing". With the support of her tutors, she had decided that she was "going to try and do my certificate of education. I want to teach, and that's what I want to teach…". She explained that although she had originally enrolled to do veterinary nursing, she had suggested to the tutor that she was also interested in becoming a lecturer if she was capable. She told me that after her placement that:

> I came back and said, 'I don't want to do vet nursing anymore'. She said she thought I should do teaching and so we looked at a few possible options. I will put my head down and see where it gets me. (Kate).

Kate had secured some temporary animal care work at the college at weekends and had developed a good relationship with her tutor, who had helped her broaden her aspirations window and had supported her towards achieving her aspirations gap. She explained that her tutor had:

> Managed to get me a placement at main site… shadowing the tutors up there next year. It is more a case of get your name known, get talking, and they already know that I work here at weekends, but I had to interview for the position. (Kate).

Both women learners (**Andrea and Kate**) on the Level 3 Small Animal Management course, explained how they had started on the Level 2 course first and were moved up onto a higher level once they had submitted their first pieces of coursework. During their first interviews, they had explained how they wanted to complete their Level 3 and then progress onto Higher Education. By the second interviews, they had achieved the milestones required to continue towards their newly expanded aspirations gap.

Sarah, a student at Adult College, had initial aspirations of becoming a social worker and also suggested that she had considered but ruled out primary teaching because of her experiences as a TA. She had enrolled on the Access to Social Studies course and told me that:

> When I came here, I was going to do social work because you can almost guarantee you can walk into a job. [But] after I got here, I did a course on social work and social care [module on the Access course] … I just didn't think I would get on very well with the work that they were asking. Despite the fact that I did quite well, I didn't feel that I understood it properly in class and I was getting stressed about it, so I looked into different routes that I could take…that is what brought the aspiration that I want to be an educational psychologist. (Sarah).

This change is significant because having only applied for Social Work courses, she had to apply through 'extra'[111] to do a BSc in Psychology. She explained that she felt fortunate to be accepted onto a course. Although she only needed to get pass grades to secure her place, she had been mainly achieving distinction grades and was able" to get a scholarship for going to [a local] university for high achievers". She told me:

> I am doing a full single subject in psychology so I will have that – I can't remember what it is called, you can apply to a registered psychologist after that. Then I will need to do a masters. I have looked it all up. I have heard that you can do a Masters and PGCE at the same time, so if I didn't get onto a PhD course, then I could go into teaching if I needed to. Then hopefully, I will get to go on a PhD at the [Russell Group] university to be an educational psychologist. (Sarah).

Like Kate, Sarah had changed her mind after she had gained vocational knowledge and experience, but her aspirations had expanded from an MA in Social Work to a PhD. By the second interview, she had a clear route map of what she needed to do to achieve her expanded aspirations gap, but also like Andrea, she had a 'back up' plan of what she could do if she could not access a place on a psychology doctorate which she knew were highly competitive. Even though the 'expanded aspirations group' only

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[111] An additional choice on her UCAS application.

represented a minority of learners, it was interesting that they were **all** on Level 3 programmes of study and of white ethnic origin. Moreover, they were more likely to have suffered mental health issues prior to starting their course and were the only learners in the sample who had been moved from a lower to a higher course during the year.

Constrained aspirations

There were multiple ways in which initial aspirations could be described as having been constrained, which Appadurai calls "Brittle Horizons", that is where they either failed to meet their aspirations gap, they narrowed their aspirations or developed new aspirations. This group were more likely to progress onto Further or Higher Education than go straight into employment related to their course at the end.

The most common way in which aspirations were constrained were either as a consequence of downgrading or narrowing their goals because they were not able to progress onto the course they had initially aspired to. In some cases, it was not because they had not achieved sufficiently but because of various issues related to their health that they chose not to go further.

At the first interview, **Amy** described how she wanted to specialise in educational psychology and more specifically, to specialise in supporting children on the autistic spectrum, "because I have two of my three children on the spectrum that's why it interests me, because of them". By our second interview, Amy had visited a couple of local university campuses and was unsure of whether to apply for an Education or Psychology Degree. She explained that she found one campus "overwhelming" and found the other a "nice place…it was accessible" and had spoken to lots of people who gave good feedback. However, she shared that:

> Along the way, I sort of…something gave me a light bulb moment and I have changed….it is not a total change because it is still education-based,

> but it has made me realise that I have got skills in other areas that I can integrate, so I have decided to do another course instead of the education ones. (Amy).

Amy told me that she was planning to do a Foundation Degree in Learning Support at a small local university centre for a year, but could also complete an Undergraduate Degree because they offered:

> Top-ups so you can make up your degree – so the learning support degree, then you make it up and I am interested in the family support degree which they do there. (Amy).

She explained that she had decided to take this route, where she would do a Foundation Degree and then complete a "top up" which she hoped would enable her to:

> Support teenagers, preferably who've left school. Maybe they have had a bad time at school or maybe having a bad time at home or school, whether they have additional needs. So, I have personal experience of that. (Amy).

She told me how she thought that the *"courses are really good, they are around education – and different aspects of education. This is more direct".* Amy responded to questions about why she had changed her aspirations, by telling me that she was keen to get back into the workplace sooner because she was worried that she had become:

> Unemployable and people won't want to employ me. Nobody has ever said anything concrete that they can't give you a job because of fibromyalgia, but people ask you and…I am honest about my disabilities. So that does worry me, obviously. I would like to have a job – even if it's just part-time. I don't want to be one of those people sat at home all day – watching Jeremy Kyle. (Amy).

She went on to explain that although she was anxious about gaining a placement because of her disability and how she would manage it within the placement, she shared that knowing family support workers had alleviated some of her concerns as they were able to offer her a placement. Amy was positive about what she described as 'practical reasons' behind this change, and yet it is important to recognise that her aspirations had narrowed from undergraduate to foundation degree-level study.

Similarly, by her second interview, **Collette** had revised her initial aspirations from a physiotherapy degree to a health studies degree which she was disappointed by and told me, “it is the hardest profession to get into when you go for the five [UCAS] choices, and I tried to get in … but the competition is fierce”. She explained that she:

> Got to one interview [for physiotherapy], another offered me sports science [no interview] and another I did get interviewed – they offered me sports science as well. I think if they liked you – you must need gold stars to get onto physio and I don’t know whether looking at me they wouldn’t accept me. My plan is I am going to lose my weight, but I want this [course] out of the way first. (Collette).

Collette disclosed that she felt that if she lost a significant amount of weight and did well on the BSc in Health Sciences at a university [Russell Group], she had the possibility of being able to “top-up for another year after to be able to be a physio”. She described that the Health Sciences BSc was a ”bit of a broad one [course]”, which would allow her to change her mind if she could not access the physio ‘top up’; she could do “eyes instead” [ophthalmology] or another allied health profession somewhere else.

Safina, a Level 2 Beauty Therapy student, had also downgraded her aspirations telling me that:

> I have chosen not to go onto Level 3 Beauty Therapy … It is hard, watching the girls doing it has put me off. I got scared and I am going to continue to Level 2 hairdressing. (Safina).

She had some background knowledge of hairdressing having previously completed Level 1, and she planned to “enrol in September for Hairdressing at Level 2. They start giving us the basics for Level 3 hairdressing [at the end of the year] and then I can decide”. Like Collette, Safina justified her decision to downgrade her goals on the basis that she was leaving her options open with the possibility of expanding them later on. And yet, it is difficult to ignore that by the end of my study, they had narrowed and reduced their aspirations.

There were a few other participants who had not achieved their initial instrumental aspirations for various reasons. **Hoda**, who was on a vocational ESOL course in Beauty Therapy, had not been able to complete her course because she was delighted to be having a baby, and planned to return to college to finish her course when her child was older. **Nia**, an Access student who had secured a conditional offer for a nursing degree at a local university, had not completed all of her assessments by the end of the study and therefore had not met the entry requirements required to start her course.

Finally, work-related aspirations were constrained for a couple of learners who had successfully completed their vocational programme of study. For example, **Precious** was pleased to have successfully completed her Teaching Assistant (TA) qualification and placement whilst working part-time as a Care Assistant but had been unable to gain related employment. She explained that she was "hoping to find a job as we are finishing. It would be very nice if I can find a job. I have started applying for jobs, I am waiting [to hear]".Precious had been trying to get work as a TA and was worried that if she could not "find enough hours as teaching hours. Then I will have to leave that job but if not, I will have to carry on with both". She had therefore applied for temporary roles, telling me that she planned to:

> Go for supply, I think supply is really good just because I will be going in and will get experience. I have put some application forms to start in September and have registered with some agencies too. (Precious).

Although Precious was positive about agency work and was still employed in the care sector, she had not achieved her aspirations of gaining a full-time permanent role as a TA by the end of her study.

Despite achieving her initial aspirations of gaining a Business Admin qualification and developing her language skills, **Ana** expressed that her role had become uncertain because of the threat of redundancies. At her second interview, she told me that:

> Today they announced cuts, I mean I don't even know if I will have a job here at the end of my apprenticeship which ends in July. I am really worried, I have done all of this work to get here in a new country. (Ana).

She explained that these uncertainties along with concerns over finances, had prompted her to consider the possibility of returning to university to complete the degree she had started in Poland. However, she was unclear of how to access the course because of issues of qualification equivalence or where to go. Ana's situation is more complex than the categories suggest; on the one hand, her aspirations could be considered to have expanded (or emerged) as she was considering higher study. On the other hand, her aspirations at that specific point more closely reflected constrained aspirations as she could not see a clear route towards them, and her employment situation meant that she was uncertain of being able to meet her initial aspirations.

The reasons given by respondents about why their aspirations had become constrained were diverse, and yet this group all shared a strong sense of wanting to start again when we discussed their initial aspirations at the first interview (after abuse, mental health problems or migration). While it is reasonable to suggest that their previous experiences and reasons for wanting to return to college had been significant barriers to overcome, others had shared similar experiences of adversity and this had not resulted in their aspirations becoming constrained. On the contrary, other learners had achieved (Fazia), adapted (Emma, Chloe and Jackie) or expanded (Andrea and Sarah) their aspirations. The learners discussed above were more likely than any other 'aspirations group' to have three or more categories of disadvantage, where factors such as being an ethnic minority, a migrant, a lone parent, caring for a child with a disability or working alongside study, intersected in complex ways.

This section has considered the extent to which learners had achieved the *initial aspirations* they set for themselves. Although some had achieved this, it was far more

common for learners not to achieve their aspirations either because they had emerged, expanded or been constrained. This suggests that learners' aspirations are not static but are dynamic and change as learners respond to new information, opportunities and experiences within the educational setting, as well as their broader social context. In some instances, change may be considered a positive outcome, except for constrained aspirations where goals have been adjusted often, but not always, in response to structural constraints – some of which, could be described as 'gendered SoC'. The next section considers the ways in which learners navigated some of these SoC while they were pursuing their educational aspirations.

Aspirations, Gender and the SoC

Previously (chapter five), I explored the complex and diverse constraints which had influenced some women learners to return to college and reflected on some of the constraints which women learners had to overcome in order to participate. In this section, I consider responses to questions from the second interview, which sought to understand the structural constraints women learners had to navigate as they attempted to pursue their educational aspirations. As in the preceding chapter, constraints on women learners' ability to pursue their aspirations have been framed using Folbre's (1994) gendered structures of constraint (assets, norms, preferences and rules), which are based on intersectional disadvantages of gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, nationality and class (see also chapter three). More specifically, the responses given by learners about barriers in the second interview related to assets, norms and preferences, which reflected some of the complex intersectional disadvantages that they experienced in their everyday lives. Even though this sub-section illustrates specific individual examples of constraints across a diverse sample of women learners, they are representative of women learners in FE in an austerity context.

Assets

Folbre (1994), argues that assets are a first-order gendered structure of constraint because without time or money, one cannot pursue their life goals (1994, p.54). Earlier (in chapter five), I briefly presented the ways in which some women learners experienced the constraints of time and/or money before or at the start of their course, but the constraints on assets appeared to be a more prevalent concern as learners attempted to navigate the competing constraints of care, work, finances and study. Moreover, it is somewhat difficult to separate the constraints on assets from other gendered SoC, for example, norms regarding who is responsible for care work are likely to affect assets of time, money and preferences. In this section, I focus specifically on the ways that some women learners experienced the constraints of time and money, using the themes of work, care and money.

Work

The majority of women in the study were not in paid employment; only six were in paid employment at the first interview and eight by the second interview. There were a couple[112] of others who had been doing unpaid placements as a statutory component of their Teaching Assistant course. The eight learners who were in paid work alongside study were employed in a wide range of sectors including care, animal care, service industries or administration sectors. More than half of the learners were in relatively new roles (e.g., Nia, Ana and Collette), or had secured employment during their course (e.g., Kate and Andrea), which broadly supported their aspirations. The remaining three were employed in established roles that were not directly related[113] to their aspirations. Moreover, the learners who worked alongside study were not only

[112] Precious is counted as having paid employment at the start of the course, and although she was also engaged in an unpaid placement, has not been counted twice.
[113] Maybe with the exception of Toni, who aspired to become a nurse and was working in the ambulance control room.

diverse[114], but each experienced different shift patterns, work conditions and care responsibilities which added to the complexity of constraints. Even though I focus on work here, it intertwines with the other themes of time, money and care. In what follows, work is predominantly discussed a constraint on learners' aspirations, however, this was not the case for all learners who found it helpful for cementing their vocational aspirations.

Shift patterns and work conditions appeared to act as a constraint for some learners. This seemed to be particularly problematic for those who worked in the care sector (regardless of how long they had worked in the field), who found juggling study with the physical demands of the job, changing work patterns, overtime, and night shifts particularly difficult (Nia, Precious and Collette). This was not only problematic for the two lone parents, but also for Collette, who could be described as having less onerous care responsibilities.

Precious, a lone parent who worked night shifts, explained that her "brother babysits at nights" because she had no other childcare support. She went on to say, "when I go to work it is hard for me because my work has finished at 8 am – my daughter starts school at 9 am far away from work". Although her manager had changed her rota so that she was able to work "Saturday and Sunday nights", she had to come to college on Monday, which she told me:

> I don't mind coming from nights to come straight here like I did last night. [But] I don't want to go to school from a night shift, it is so tiring. It is too difficult – especially when you are stood in front of the kids. When I teach year 2, I go home, I go straight to sleep because I am so tired. (Precious).

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[114] In terms of their age, ethnicity, race, sexuality, migration status, care responsibilities and marital status.

Despite her attempts to organise her work patterns around her two-day placement so that she could have a day off, her manager would call her into work at short notice, which left her tired and stretched for time for other commitments. Precious went on to explain that these ad hoc night shifts were problematic once she started doing assignments, as she was only able to work on Friday because:

> I don't have a computer in my house, so I have to go to the library, and I stay there for a long time working out how to do it. It will come out all wrong and I have to do it again. (Precious).

These difficulties had intensified around Christmas time when she had been expected to work extra shifts, even though she had coursework deadlines to meet and wanted to be at home with her children.

Like Precious, by the second interview, **Collette** explained how she had also been under pressure to increase her working hours by the care home she worked at. Even though she only supported her mother with the care of her adult sister, she explained that she was finding the competing demands of work and study difficult to balance. She told me:

> I am supposed to do 22.5 hours which is three days [at work], then three days here at college, that gives me one day off. But with people being sick, or with the service users we have got …… we need more staff in to look after them 24 hours a day. So that meant more hours for us. I was doing this course and full-time hours basically, so that was a right struggle. But it was what I wanted to do. I needed to get a year in work for the healthcare course and needed to get the grades [also]. (Collette).

Despite being on a permanent day shift pattern in a residential care home, **Nia also** explained how she found juggling study and work difficult:

> I have been a carer for one year in a nursing home. It is not easy, it is tiring but it is something I need to become a nurse so I have to keep doing it. And when I go to university, I may have to continue with it until I get my degree. (Nia).

At the same time, like Collette, she recognised that getting experience of care helped her to secure a place onto a nursing degree. However, in the latter part of this quote,

she implied that she may have to continue with part-time agency care work while doing her degree. When I prompted her about why, she said she needed to “work hard to pay for things”.

Two of the three students who worked in the care sector were hoping to further their studies in that area and experienced similar work-related constraints, which evolved over their course of study. Each of them had negotiated specific work hours that would give them sufficient experience as well as time for study and other activities. However, their reality was different because they were either expected to work longer or different hours and/or found it tiring balancing all aspects of their life. There seemed to be a difference between the work conditions and expectations of the learners who worked in care, compared to the experiences of those in other sectors (e.g., retail, business or service sector). Even though these learners were also more likely to have established long-term positions or significant prior experience in the sector, this was the case for some of those in the care sector too. When talking about work in relation to study, they were more likely to refer to balancing childcare in relation to work, in contrast to those working in care, who focused on the ways that their work had disrupted their study plans despite having meticulously planned their work and study schedule in advance of starting the course.

Interestingly however, for Andrea and Kate (both on the Animal Management Course), commencing work related to the vocational area of study during the course seemed to enhance or give them a greater sense of agency, rather than constrain their experiences and aspirations. It is possible that their chosen field of Animal Management offered greater job satisfaction or work conditions. However, the narratives of these learners suggest in different ways that there was some relationship between gaining employment that was flexible once they had fully settled into their course, and them not only becoming clearer on what their aspirations were, but also expanding them.

Andrea, who originally aspired to be a dog trainer, had left her job due to workplace stress and came back to college. She explained that:

> It has been a massive struggle financially. We have literally not had heating or hot water on for weeks in the winter and literally not had enough food. Eating cereal and literally just feeding my daughter and my animals. (Andrea).

In the period between interviews, Andrea had successfully gained self-employment as a dog walker which she not only really enjoyed, but it had had a positive impact on her financial well-being. She explained that this had:

> Meant I could claim working tax credit. So, I haven't had to borrow money for six weeks now. Bursaries have helped me as much as they possibly could do, I am still in massive rent arrears. It has been worth it, and I try not to let it get me down. I just plod along. (Andrea).

It is clear from this quote that Andrea needed to gain work because she was in a financially desperate situation, and yet, as I will illustrate in more detail later, this was facilitated by her increased sense of agency.

Kate also started working in-between interviews and told me, "I am working here as well now – I am here seven days a week", but was less concerned about the financial benefits of working and explained that her husband was supporting the family. She told me that even "though I am working, it is not a big wage" because she "loved working with animals" and as I will expand later, work had given her greater bargaining power and a sense of agency within the household.

Care

As I outlined in the methodology (chapter four), the majority of learners described having some form of care responsibilities, whether that be care for children and young adults by mother learners, or for siblings, parents and elders by single women learners (see tables 4 and 5). The learners with care responsibilities were diverse, not simply in

terms of their relationship status and/or who they were caring for, but also in the ways that intersecting characteristics (age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, work patterns, the numbers of and ages of children) and the demands of their course shaped their experiences of managing care so that they could pursue their aspirations. In what follows, I unpack some of this complexity by focusing on the sample of learners who were mothers first, before briefly considering the minority who were not parents but provided care to relatives or significant others.

The majority of parents initially spoke positively about how the formal care arrangements they had made and the financial support they received had enabled them to pursue their educational aspirations. Those who were the most positive tended to have secured funded (or affordable) wrap-around school or nursery care so that they could study and/or work, and a small number were on courses that accommodated school hours.

As I outlined in chapter five, the two lone mothers whose preschool children had become eligible for nursery, were particularly positive about how this had enabled them to return to college. For example, Kathleen explained that she could not go to college until her child became eligible for funding, saying:

> My child [aged four] is in the college nursery – it is great. She is there and we get on with the nursery staff … They pay the nursery fees, she is here for 12 hours that I'm at college and the government pay for the fifteen hours. So Thursday and Friday, she is at nursery. I get them hours to do a bit of cleaning and shopping, so it helps in all aspects. (Kathleen).

Eligibility for universal childcare once her child had turned three years old had provided **Jess** (also a single parent), who had been unsuccessful in gaining employment[115] since her son had been born, with the time to do something, it has been a lot easier since he has got older". The narratives of these two learners who had

[115] More specifically, employment which enabled her to combine work and care.

‘stayed at home’ to look after their children while they were young, had experienced the positive impacts of being able to access childcare as their children got older.

In contrast, there were a minority of other mother learners for whom making or paying for care arrangements so that they could attend work and/or study, could be described as a SoC. This was most evident for those who were ineligible for childcare funding and/or had unsociable work patterns, which meant that they had to rely on informal childcare. For example, Debbie described at her first interview, that paying for nursery fees while waiting for her youngest daughter to become eligible for universal childcare had been “crippling’”, but by the second interview, this had eased:

> Now she has turned three, she has got fifteen hours. That’s brilliant but I have done more or less two years without any help. I don’t regret it because I have got on with it, you just do. (Debbie).

There were a few others who either because of the prohibitive costs of childcare or their unsociable work patterns, relied on informal childcare from either their parents or siblings so that they could pursue study. One student, Michelle, explained that she was desperate to pursue her aspirations of becoming a Teaching Assistant (and maybe a teacher), but as a lone parent of three daughters (the youngest of which was not yet eligible for nursery funding), she would not have been able to do the course because:

> If I had to pay for childcare – unless it was paid for me, I wouldn’t be able to do it. I wouldn’t be able to afford to pay for it. Cause, If I was, I would have to pay for it. I would have to make cutbacks elsewhere and that would affect the children, so it just wouldn’t be feasibly possible. (Michelle).

Thus, without the help of her parents, Michelle would not be able to pursue her goals.

Similarly, there were two other students who relied on informal childcare because of practical rather than financial reasons. More specifically, their parents or a sibling, informally cared for their child/ren because formal childcare was not always available

due to their complex, changeable and unsociable work patterns. Both described this as placing a strain on them in different ways. For example, **Precious,** a lone parent, explained that she was working nights so that she could study, look after her children outside of school hours and attend her work placement, but this meant that she relied on her brother for childcare. She shared that this was also one of the reasons why she aspired to get a job with more regular and family-friendly work hours because it:

> Is better to doing night shifts just because my brother babysits nights – I pay him £10 a night, but it is difficult because if I don't, he will tell me 'I am busy tonight'. (Precious).

Even though **Toni** was in a relationship, they both had complex work patterns that often involved one or both of them working unsociable hours. Consequently, they relied on their parents to provide unpaid care. Toni told me that:

> It is hard. They have been brilliant. My sister brings my mum up once a fortnight and they look after him for a couple of days while I am at college. Then alternate weeks her [my wife's] parents, come up and look after him. (Toni).

In addition, she explained that because of her part-time work commitments of two twelve-hour evening shifts until nine pm, she had to rely on nursery too. She said, "my wife's job can be quite demanding, quite long shifts, so he normally goes to nursery two days a week". At her second interview, she explained that juggling work, care and study had been difficult because of the demands of her course, her work and her wife's job.

Money

Economic hardship was discussed by almost half of the women learners in this study, who suggested that they had experienced some form of financial constraints before or

during their study.[116] The interrelationship between work, study, care and money[117], means that some of these findings have been discussed elsewhere (above and chapter five). Therefore, in order to avoid repetition, the aim of this sub-section is to provide a brief summary of the complex ways in which women learners experienced economic insecurity.

Learners who mentioned financial worries tended to do so incidentally as part of related discussions usually about care, work and study. A minority of others referred to them when asked specifically about barriers to study in their second interview.[118] Regardless of when they were discussed, all except one learner had experienced financial insecurities to varying degrees since they started their course and, in a few cases, they specified this as the reason why they had returned to education. Although some women worked part-time alongside their course, this was not sufficient to address their financial concerns – especially those who had to pay for childcare (e.g., Nia, Precious and Debbie).

There were nine learners who specifically discussed experiencing financial constraints, the majority of whom were lone parents (6/9) and of those, two thirds (4/6) were also migrants. It was notable that lone mothers who were migrants, were more likely to use general terms to describe this hardship. For example, **Fazia** was initially vague in her description that living alone had proved to be "hard, sorting stuff out", but when I asked her what she meant by "hard", she told me, "finance and everything, it has been hard". Similarly, I referred to **Precious** earlier, who vaguely implied that she could be struggling financially when she told me that "I can't stop my work, just because I want money". She described the "pressure of buying Christmas presents for her children"

[116] I noted earlier how a minority of learners spoke positively about the financial support they had received which enabled them to study (and work), especially those who were eligible for universal childcare.
[117] For example, Andrea, Nia, Michelle and Collette.
[118] Possibly because they became more comfortable sharing information.

and made references to “not having a computer at home” until the second interview, when she told me she had managed “to pay for a laptop”. Not all migrant women learners were as vague. **Ana** spoke passionately about how the pay in her apprenticeship was “not good” and described how she would have struggled without her mother helping with childcare. She told me:

> I don’t want to earn £50,000, I just want to earn enough and have a happy life for me and my son. I just want enough to live on that is all – but it is so hard being stuck on this apprenticeship. (Ana).

These sentiments were echoed by others, especially Chloe and Andrea, who described how they had navigated the financial SoC in order to pursue their goals. **Chloe** explained that she was still repaying *“debts off and things”,* which were coming to “an end soon”. However, in the meantime, money had been *“tight”* and she was grateful for “the fact I have been able to claim my bus fares have been a massive thing. It is amazing how quickly your money goes on transport.”

Similarly, **Andrea,** whose narrative I presented earlier, shared how gaining a job had meant that she was no longer having to rely on bursaries or loans, but reflected that it had been a:

> Bad year [for her and her daughter] … we walk around the supermarket, she adds it up because you don’t have enough money – I think that shapes you as a person. But now we can have the heating on, not just the hot water. (Andrea).

The findings presented here are intended to provide an overview of the ways in which the women learners in this study experienced financial constraints to varying degrees. At the same time, the responses given by some learners suggested that it was a sensitive subject and as such, the opaque responses given at times made it difficult to decode intended meaning. Moreover, it is possible that other women were also concerned about money but did not feel comfortable discussing it. Despite these limitations, the evidence presented in the narratives here and in the previous sub-

section, brings into sharp relief the gravity of some women learners' economic constraints.

Norms and Preferences

Folbre (1994) argues that norms and preferences are SoC that work together. ***Norms*** relate to the *implicit rules* based on social authority grounded in gender, culture, ethnicity, race, age and marital status. ***Preferences*** are defined as what someone wants and how much, which are shaped by and are often in tension with norms. Folbre suggests that norms and preferences are part of an ongoing process rather than occurring at a specific point in time. Therefore, it is likely that norms and preferences have been shaped by the social context and developed across the life course. Although norms and preferences are dealt with separately here, they very closely relate to other SoC (assets in particular).

The women learners in this study expressed tensions between norms and preferences in two main ways: firstly, in relation to an internalised sense of guilt about pursuing their own goals and secondly, as external criticism (expectation or discouragement) from others. And yet, it was sometimes difficult to determine whether the tensions arose as a result of external or internal sources, as norms and preferences seemed to be extremely complex and dynamic SoC, changing over time and in the thick of social life. In what follows, I discuss the ways in which women learners' narratives suggested that norms and preferences had shaped or constrained their aspirations. These are framed thematically starting with external (expectations), followed by internal (guilt/time) tensions.

External criticism or disapproval or expectation

As I outlined earlier (chapter five), some women learners (e.g., Ana and Safina) shared that their educational aspirations had been openly criticised, discouraged or disapproved of by parents or partners at the outset, on the basis that they were

subverting gender norms in some way, and they went on to describe how they had resisted these SoC. And yet, there were others for whom discouragement or disapproval became more evident as they progressed through their course. This mostly took the form of lack of encouragement or disdain towards their studies, usually by parents. For example, **Andrea** explained that:

> My family think me studying is a bit of a joke really…. I rang to tell my dad I had got into university and he said is that good? I didn't invite him to my awards evening, they are a waste of space really…. (Andrea).

Despite her suggestion that she received a lack of encouragement from her father, she went on to tell me that her "sister was really supportive and is thinking of doing it next year".

Likewise, **Chloe** explained at her first interview, that her mum had never been interested in her getting an education. She told me, "I don't think that she's comfortable with the idea of me becoming academic in life". When I followed up with Chloe about how these tensions were going, she shared that she had recently told her parents how she was getting on and that she planned to go to university. She said:

> My dad was really pleased for me and said, 'oh you are getting on great'. I told my mum and I said, 'I was doing alright, and did I tell you, I have applied for university'. She said, 'oh, are you? What are you going to do?' And I said, 'theology and sociology'. She just screwed her face up at me like she was saying, 'I bet that is going to be hard!' But that were all she said. (Chloe).

As presented here, these quotes are not specifically gendered SoC however, their life history narratives and life grids suggested that during childhood their parents had expected them to provide care and support for them at the detriment of their schooling. Both learners suggested that although they were disappointed in their parents' apparent disinterest, it had not affected their aspirations. This was perhaps because their reactions mirrored earlier experiences, which they had become accustomed to. Rather than deterring them from their aspirations, this seemed to

make them more determined to achieve them and acting in their own interests suggests that they subverted what was expected of them.

Internal: Norms and Preferences – guilt or duty

Previously, I focused on the ways that assets (time and money) could act as a gendered SoC on women learners' ability to study, but more specifically, the practicalities associated with accessing affordable and appropriate childcare. And yet, as I mentioned earlier, some of the women learners in this study inferred that they experienced cognitive dissonance between their desire to pursue their own goals and their roles as mothers, carers, wives and partners. These tensions were most evident in the second interview, as students had either become more aware of or had to respond to competing pressures.

The pressures of study, care and work on time experienced by some learners appeared to be progressive, that is, they tended to start the course with a clear idea of how they would manage their care arrangements and study so that neither imposed on the other. However, by the second interview, most described to varying degrees that the reality was somewhat different. Some women learners described how they had adjusted to demands of care and study, as illustrated by **Andrea** in her second interview. She told me, "it was hard at first, to fit into a new routine of getting her homework and mine [done]. But I found I enjoyed helping her with homework more".

Nia expressed that juggling work, study and children had not been:

> … easy, but it is something I need to do. I know that it will not be that easy but I have to keep doing it. I know what I am going to face [when I go on to university] but it is what I want. (Nia).

Others tended to be more explicit about how the adjustment proved to be more difficult once they realised what the demands of study were. **Chloe** told me at her first interview:

> They go to after school club four days a week…. So, we don't get as much time, but because I treat studying like 9 to 5, when I go home, I am not sat doing any of my work. (Chloe).

However, by her second interview, Chloe explained that not working after 5pm had been unsustainable as her father had been ill over Christmas. This meant that she had "fell behind with my assignments" and was "up until 2 or 3 in the morning trying to get stuff done", and "working most evenings". She explained that this had made her:

> Feel a little bit guilty at times, that I am not at home as much. I keep reassuring them that it is not going to be forever … So sometimes I feel like I should be there to make sure their tea is on the table, pick 'em up from school because very often, I am absolutely exhausted when I get home. (Chloe).

Debbie described how she had found that although her goals of becoming a physiotherapist had meant that she had to do "quite a lot of hard work this year", working part-time and helping her mother-in-law had "been a nightmare". She told me:

> Obviously, I have two kids at home, I want to make sure they don't suffer and have my head constantly in a book. I want to play with them as well … (Debbie).

She went on to share that although her husband had been supportive, he would sometimes say "'oh god, you are doing work again'. [Although] I would say 97% of the time he has been spot on".

Michelle (a mother of three), like others (e.g., Debbie and Chloe), was keen for her studies not to impact on her children, describing that she planned to study while her children were in bed, but this proved to be difficult as "by that point you are frazzled" However, she went on to take a more critical stance about how she did not want her children to:

> Suffer because of my selfish needs [education]. Even though study is a priority, my kids will always be my first priority…. There is a balance, I think that is the same for all women as much as we think…. we would like

> to think in the name of feminism we can have it all, but in reality, no you can't. (Michelle).

To varying degrees, the narratives outlined here reveal some of the ongoing tensions between the ways that gender roles (norms) and pursuing their own goals (preferences), shaped their educational experiences, and potentially for some (like Michelle), their future aspirations. At the same time, while some of these women experienced *guilt* because they did not want their children *to suffer or miss out* in any way, they also explained how they were proud that they felt that they had been a positive role model for their children.

Some women learners in this study found that they experienced tensions between norms and preferences when the balance between their goals and the needs of others had altered significantly since starting their course. More specifically, when there had either been unexpected changes to their care responsibilities (Sarah), or their children had special educational needs which had impacted on time for study (Kate and Amy). This was most notable in the case of **Sarah,** who (like Collette and Emma), had managed to negotiate a reduction in care responsibilities with her family. She explained at the second interview, that her paternal grandmother had become "quite poorly", which meant that she had to help her dad with her care. She told me, "me dad doesn't do that much to be fair, because he thinks it is his mum and he doesn't want to do the intimate stuff". This meant that Sarah had to move out of Adult College in February where she had been resident on the Access to HE course since September, and commute in on the days when her classes took place. She reflected that before she moved back home, she would finish class and "then immediately go and study after". However, since moving back home, she had found that:

> I've got a lot of essays on at the moment. When I was here, I split my time up on a timeframe … it worked out a lot better for me here, which I didn't expect it to go so far downhill as I left, but … I am busy between six and nine. When gran goes to bed, that's when I start studying [after 9 pm], so I am a lot more tired. (Sarah).

Sarah's narrative illustrates how changes to care responsibilities can act as a constraint on study, not just in the practical sense, but also when analysed against the backdrop of her educational biography. The competing tensions between her life goals (preferences) and meeting the needs of others (gender norms), are brought into sharp relief. And yet, as I pointed out earlier, Sarah was one of only a few students who expanded their aspirations, and in the process, developed a greater sense of agency – a point I return to in the next section.

Similar tensions were experienced by a couple of other student mothers who explained that despite having made meticulous plans to ensure that they could pursue their own goals and meet the needs of their families, they experienced problems that challenged this. For different reasons, Amy and Kate explained at the second interview, that they had not expected to experience the problems that they had. Amy (a mother of three), described how her eldest daughter (aged 17) who had only recently received an Asperger's Spectrum Disorder diagnosis, had been struggling to adjust since Amy had started college because:

> She is very over-reliant on me and she does struggle with relationships … If anything goes wrong in her life, ANYTHING, it might be a simple problem [but] she'll phone me here and expect me to solve a problem. Sometimes this annoys me, and other times, I just have to deal with it because if I don't, it will not go away. (Amy).

She went on to explain that her daughter had gone back to college and support had been arranged for her, which she hoped would mean that: "she will back off a bit. It used to really get me down when I used to be here, and I would have phone call after phone call". (Amy). When I followed up with Amy towards the end of her course, she explained that her daughter was responding well to the support and had "got a lot more independence because she has passed her driving test, which I am quite pleased about because she is not as needy … ".

Even though **Kate** did not experience disruption during college hours, she explained how her youngest son's recent behavioural difficulties had been affecting her ability to work at home. She told me:

> *Billy has been having some behavioural difficulties, it all seems to have stemmed from around about Christmas. That seems to be when the school picked up on it as well. You know he is quite hard work, shouting you twenty times a day – there is always something really … he won't sit and settle … There is nothing wrong with him you know, diagnosed or anything like that. …... If I am working at home, he is swinging off the back of the chair or hangs off the back of the desk … It is hard. (Kate).*

She described how her other children had recognised what she was trying to do and would "help me and step in and say, 'come on Billy, we will go and do this, or we will do that'". She disclosed that she was worried about how she would manage care and study at home once her eldest son joined the military before the end of her course as "he has been amazing, really supportive".

Although both of these women (Amy and Kate) were married, their narratives reflect that they held primary responsibility[119] for the children, which was most evident in their descriptions about what happened when problems arose at or after school. In spite of these difficulties, the actions they had taken suggest that they were not only determined to pursue their own goals while conforming to implicit gender norms, but also asserted themselves as they engaged in a process of bargaining within the household.

[119] That is not to suggest they were not supported by their spouses, on the contrary, both spoke positively about their husbands.

Aspirations fulfilled – Partially/differently

So far, I have discussed the dynamic nature of women learners' aspirations, the extent to which they achieved their initial aspirations and the gendered SoC that some women learners navigate in order to participate in FE. This section considers what the women learners in this study gained from participating in FE beyond their aspirations. More specifically, I focus on the reflections they had about how their agency, self-worth, confidence and well-being had improved over time.

In the theoretical framework (chapter three), I discussed some of the difficulties in defining and making judgements about agency. In order to mitigate some of these issues, I draw on Kabeer's conceptualisations of women's agency (1999; see also Rowlings, 1999) as not just the capacity to pursue their own interests, but also the "change in consciousness" they experience as they reflect on their increased sense of agency (Gammage, Kabeer and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2016, p.5). Thus, in chapter three, I framed these two aspects of agency as either being demonstrable in the sense that it was something that formed part of the process of bargaining, or as an individual's reflection about how their self-worth, confidence and identity had improved. In the previous section, I presented some of the ways in which women learners demonstrated their sense of agency through processes of bargaining. In this section, I focus on the reflections that learners made about the various ways in which their sense of agency had grown.

Growing Confidence

Participants were asked what they thought they had gained from returning to college in both interviews. The most popular response given by almost every respondent was that they had grown in confidence, especially by the second interview. Even though a few learners had mentioned low confidence in their first interviews, they spoke for longer and in more detail about why they thought they lacked confidence. Their

narratives suggested that by the second interview, they had gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which returning to education had helped them to build their confidence. This supports Kabeer's (1999) suggestion that some of the women learners experienced a "change in consciousness" about the ways in which pursuing their own life goals has helped them to gain individual agency and confidence. The small selection of responses below illustrates how some learners had gained:

> More confidence, more will power and more get up and go. (Kathleen).

> Confidence and the skills to speak to and communicate with people. (Tatva).

> I did not have no confidence, I could not sit in a room the way I'm speaking to you now. (Safina).

There were diverse and multiple explanations given by learners about why they felt more confident such as feeling an increased sense of independence, agency, friendships and self-efficacy, which reflects the complexity and heterogeneity of life histories and experiences. Interestingly, there did not appear to be a direct relationship between a growing sense of confidence and the achievement of or deviation from the initial aspirations they had set themselves. On the contrary, there seemed to be a fairly equal share of learners who described that their confidence had grown, regardless of whether their aspirations had been achieved or changed (emerged, expanded, or constrained). And yet, those learners I detailed in chapter five, whose complex and harrowing life histories had prompted them to make a 'fresh start' (because of abuse, migration or mental health issues), provided the longest accounts and reflections about the ways in which education had helped them to grow in confidence, as well as how it had helped them in other ways. Next, I illustrate the relationship between the adversity experienced by this group and how education had helped them. These were substantial dialogues, which means that it has only been possible to outline a sample of them here.

Those who had been in abusive relationships[120], migrated or suffered mental health problems had benefitted greatly from returning to college, especially in their growing belief that they were capable learners which was evident in some of their opening responses where they stated that they had gained:

> More confidence in myself in the value of my own thoughts. (Chloe).
>
> got my confidence back – being off work for six months, you don't go out so much. I think I have got my academic sights back. Where before I wasn't very academic. (Andrea).
>
> I am able to speak and write and build experience – I have gained confidence. (Fazia).
>
> Confidence, to be honest. I never thought I could be a teacher when I was younger, but now I enjoy it. I didn't realise I had it in me, but you never knew you had it until you try it. (Precious).
>
> More confidence in myself in the own value of my own thoughts. (Chloe).

As I mentioned earlier, these responses were given even where learners had not met their aspirations which indicates the broader value that education had brought to their lives.

In addition to gaining confidence as learners, those who faced multiple adversities were also likely to explain how returning to education had not just given them confidence in themselves as able learners, but in all aspects of their lives. For example, **Kathleen**, who was raised by her family who were travellers until she went into care after her mother passed away and having moved into the 'settled community' after leaving care, explained how she had found it difficult coming back to college because "it is hard to meet new people who don't know where you are from and stuff…."But she went on to explain that she has gained:

[120] In addition to other complex issues such as depression, addiction, incarceration or being a care leaver.

> Confidence. I know a lot more now, more hairdressing and maths. A lot more knowledge and friends. It has given me something to do. I have achieved a lot since I have been coming here. (Kathleen).

And finally, she told me how further education had "given me a head start, where would I be without it? I have got nothing, no education. It gives me that so I can get a job". This suggests that Kathleen's aspirations and what she had gained were primarily instrumental. However, she also goes on to expand on how she also wanted to be a role model for her daughter – a point I will return to later.

Like Kathleen, **Safina** also shared that she had gained so much more than just confidence by returning to college at that point in her life:

> Things have changed … so it is like as a human I have become richer. I have with the education I have achieved now. The people I have met, the confidence and the support. I think that is my lottery ticket, that is how I can put it … I mean I could not put it in a better picture – a lottery ticket. People need to be rich to have won a million, I have become a lot richer in making these choices with the support and the help from college. (Safina).

She reflected that she had not realised how her school life had negatively impacted her confidence and suggested that college had helped her regain it, telling me that "the biggest thing is, I can actually stand up to all the girls that bullied me".

A few learners described the negative impact of being in an oppressive relationship and reflected that they had become more confident and independent as a result of pursuing their own goals. For example, Chloe explained:

> I think that confidence more than anything. Obviously, I come from quite a difficult marriage and relationships. So, the confidence to leave that has enabled me to realise that I am independent, and I can be independent. I can sort of enjoy my family unit now more than I could before, I really like that. (Chloe).

Moreover, both of the women who explained how they had left marriages that had been arranged for them (Fazia and Safina), mentioned that coming to college had

helped them to gain a sense of independence. **Fazia** described that despite feeling isolated and in a difficult marriage, she had:

> got everything from education. If you see I am where I am now, is because of education. With education, you can achieve, so I feel really confident … it was a great thing … A good experience and I learnt never let the hope down. If you stick somewhere and don't let it go … just keep trying and you will get there. (Fazia).

She went on to explain how this had enabled her to represent herself independently in court in her child custody case. She said:

> I am able to speak and write and build experience, confidence. I read things, when I was in court, I didn't use the interpreter for the translation I did my own. (Fazia).

Similarly, **Safina** reflected that she had not only become more confident, but had also realised that a combination of escaping an abusive relationship and education had made her more independent:

> I even tell my boys and now I say to them, 'you are still stuck in your house with your mother-in-law. Where I say I have got my own home, my own life and I can do whatever I want'. (Safina).

In relating these two factors I am not suggesting that they did not have independence before their divorce or re-engagement with education, but rather, that a complex combination of these factors (as well as others) may have led to them feeling more independent.

Gaining an increased sense of independence was not confined to those who had previously experienced conflict or constraint within their marriages, rather, it was shared by others who had valued being able to pursue their own life goals. For example, **Hoda** described how:

> you feel you are doing something only for yourself and not for others – not for family, children or husband – doing this for myself. (Hoda).

Others like **Jess** described this sense of independence, confidence and pursuing their own goals in detail. After years of worrying about disappointing her parents, she said:

> I am happy within myself because I am doing something I want to do. I am not listening to anyone, I am not doing it for anyone, so that has made me think a bit more … I am happier but I don't know what the word is. I am happier but I don't know … true to myself. This is something for me, I am not doing it for anyone else and that makes me feel good about myself. So, I have gained myself - it isn't confidence, I have gained me. (Jess).

It was notable, especially for women learners like Jess, that in resisting the expectations of others so that they could pursue their own goals, their sense of happiness and mood had improved.

Some learners explained how they had become more socially confident and had developed friendships since coming to college. This was most commonly referred to by those who were single women or lone parents, who described feeling isolated for a variety of reasons before coming to college. For example, **Sarah** explained that she struggled socially for much of her life as she had missed some of her secondary schooling and until recently, only had one friend whom she saw when she could. Although she did not describe herself as being particularly lonely, she recognised that the course had:

> Allowed me to make friends which I think is a huge personal milestone for me. I have got a fair few really close friends here. Getting involved in a lot of stuff that I wouldn't have got involved in like debating and so on, which I wouldn't have [before]. (Sarah).

To clarify, Sarah was not suggesting that she was prevented from making friends previously by using the phrase "allowed me to make friends", rather, she was referring to how being a residential student away from the pressures of home life at the start, had both enabled and encouraged her to get involved in various aspects of student social life.

Other students described how their experiences of losing or leaving jobs had resulted in them losing confidence and feeling isolated. For example, **Collette,** who described herself as "loud and confident" before she had issues at work, stated how since coming back to college: "now I have got friends here, Joy out there is a close friend and a couple of others are". Similar reflections were made by **Andrea,** who had experienced bullying at work prior to leaving her job. She told me, "being off work for six months, you don't go out much – I have got my confidence back."

Like Collette and Sarah, Andrea had also gained socially, but did not foreground having gained friendships in the same way. This could reflect that she was one of two mature students in a cohort of traditional-aged learners on a small campus, and social relationships were less likely to have played a significant role in their college experience.

Inspiring others and the school gates

In addition to the increasing sense of confidence, self-efficacy and agency that most learners described feeling, some reflected on how their learning had positively impacted the lives of others in ways that they had not anticipated at the start of the course. These positive impacts seemed to occur in two main ways: firstly, in the positive influences they had on the educational aspirations of others, and secondly, in the confidence that they felt in engaging with their child's education.

Several learners explained how they had gained confidence because they had inspired others to return to education. **Sarah** spoke about how her family (nan and dad) were proud of her achievements and she thought that this had had a positive impact on her younger siblings:

> My brother did turn round to me around Christmas time because I am doing this, he feels like he is wasting his life … So I think he is a bit on the

> edge of deciding to come here. My little brothers and sisters are quite happy as well, they want me to take them around uni when I go. (Sarah).

Collette had also felt that she had inspired others, telling me that: "my sister-in-law is now looking to do a course [like this] and thinking about coming back to college. (Collette). As I mentioned earlier, **Andrea** had also inspired her sister to consider returning to college.

It was not only siblings who had become inspired to come to college, there were a few mothers whose children also showed an interest in pursuing a similar course. For example, **Amy** explained at her first interview how her eldest daughter had been struggling but by the second interview, she had settled into college and was considering joining Adult College the following year. Relatedly, the majority of women learners who were mothers, explained how they were keen to be good role models for their children in relation to work, study and their achievements at the start of the course. By the end, most explained feeling that they had achieved this aim and this was reflected in their changing attitudes towards education and the ways they were able to support their children's schooling.

Some mothers with primary aged school children reflected on how they felt more confident to help their children with homework and/or in their interactions with the school. Those mothers who had migrated were most likely to reflect on how they felt more confident to help their children as their language skills and confidence improved. **Precious,** who has two children, told me: "I can help my daughter with her homework – I can. Since she is in secondary school it is harder, but we sit down together." **Fazia** also described being more confident with regards to her daughter's schoolwork. She told me: "I can help her with her homework. Otherwise, if I hadn't got an education, I couldn't help her". She explained that being able to help her was important because:

> I would really love it if she had a really good education. Because I have been through all of this [arranged marriage], I don't want to make my daughter go through it too. She is really good at education and she wants to be a dentist. So, I am going to use my education to starting my own future, obviously future life for my daughter as well. (Fazia).

A couple of other mothers with primary aged children who held aspirations of going into HE, reflected about how they felt more confident and knowledgeable when dealing with their child's teacher or the school. **Debbie** explained that she had always "*got involved in the homework"* but had noticed how her interactions with her eldest daughter's school had changed since she had come back to college. She told me that:

> I am more confident in talking to her teachers, I probably ask more questions. Whereas before, I would have sat back in the background and agreed and gone away thinking, 'I should have asked this or that'. Now I question more, 'why are they doing that?' … [and ask] 'what can I do?' (Debbie).

While **Chloe's** narrative echoed Debbie's, she described how engaging in education had helped her to step into the "teaching role*"* at home and looked "at different ways of engaging the children in understanding things". She also explained how these feelings of increased confidence were reinforced when engaging with her children's teachers:

> When I approach the school for parents' evenings or the children have got difficulties. As soon as they realise that I am in Higher Education, I see a shift in them, and I feel like they are talking to me on a level. Whereas before, I felt a little bit undermined. Now I feel like I am on a level with them, I am being heard, I am hearing them, and we can work together. (Chloe).

Overall, these findings reveal the broader benefits of participating in education for women learners, whereby they act as role models to their siblings, children and potentially others. These findings indicate that to varying degrees, there is a relationship between women learners' improving confidence in their ability as learners and the extent to which they described feeling comfortable to help their children educationally and/or engage productively with their child's school. Inspiring others

(siblings) to return to college resonated with the findings presented in chapter five, whereby aspirations had emerged into view as they were exposed to potential opportunities by others (e.g., Debbie).

Happiness and Well-being

In addition to gaining confidence, there were a number of learners who reflected on how their mental health and well-being had improved as a result of returning to education.

There were eight learners who had returned to education while suffering or recovering from mental health difficulties as I explained in chapter five, these were experienced to varying degrees and often intersected with other disadvantages. The findings suggest that those who had experienced the most serious mental health diagnoses[121] were able to reflect on how education had supported their recovery. Arguably, some of these students (Amy and Jackie), had returned to college on courses that formed part of their recovery,[122] however, this was not the case for all students who were suffering serious mental health problems. For example, **Safina** reflected that if she had not returned to college, things could have been very different. She told me:

> I know where I would end up – 'six-foot down'. I would have a long time ago taken my life. I tried over and over again but never succeeded. I think to come here, and the mix has been brilliant. (Safina).

Jackie described having engaged in education as part of her mental health recovery to "see if I was going to live life if that makes sense, I was checking my options out". She reflected how it had not only helped her at a "therapeutic level", because she had "got space to think and didn't get grief for it", but that education had "given her everything".

[121] Especially those who were sectioned under the Mental Health Act or described having suicidal tendencies.
[122] Amy and Jackie.

Emma, who had been diagnosed with a personality disorder, explained that she came to college to keep her "mind occupied", and that "getting out and things like that have completely changed. I still have moments, but I would suggest it to anyone".
She went on to tell me that when she returned to college, she was not ready for work, but felt ready and planned to get a part-time or voluntary job when she was at university. In addition to describing feeling better in herself, she reflected how others such as college staff and friends, had told her:

> I was completely different. I came in here so anxious for new people, new surroundings and new everything. That was a big deal for me…. Now I am like…. all of my friends who have known me for years, they say, 'you're even better than when we knew you before, you are more confident, you talk more'. I have lost a lot of weight (7 ½ stone). My head works now, I was so stagnant and awful before. (Emma).

These few examples highlight what women learners who are trying to stabilise or recover from complex mental health problems stand to gain from returning to education in the broadest sense. At the same time, there were other learners who had not identified themselves as having a history of mental health issues, who also suggested that they felt a greater sense of well-being and that their mood had improved, to the extent that others had noticed it too.

Debbie reflected that her family had noticed that she was:

> Just feeling a lot more happier, a lot more energized. It sounds crazy as I am ten times busier. I have just got more energy to do things and get on with it. I just want to get up in the morning and get on with stuff, even if it is not college – the day-to-day stuff. They've noticed that I am more upbeat about everything. (Debbie).

Kate made similar reflections and stated that although she was working seven days a week and "mad busy" since coming back to college, she told me:

> I am more relaxed – that sounds weird when you say that. You are studying but I feel more relaxed within myself. I feel happier. Even my

> husband says that 'you're so much happier as a person'…. I don't know whether it is this place itself, it is just so much more personal. (Kate).

Overall, these findings indicate that participating in education can have a positive impact on well-being in terms of rehabilitation from mental health problems, as well as for improving mood (happiness). Those with diagnosed mental health problems inferred by their actions and comments that they were aware of these benefits, and yet others had not anticipated how engaging in education would improve their mood. Furthermore, the benefits for those with diagnosed mental health problems did not seem to be contingent on where they studied or whether they had accessed specialist courses as part of their recovery (e.g., Adult College).

In summary, the findings presented in this section provide important insights about what women learners stand to gain from FE beyond their aspirations such as confidence, agency, self-esteem, and mental well-being. Thus, even where learners for a variety of reasons had not achieved their aspirations, they still stand to gain broader benefits. Moreover, these findings are particularly significant when considered against the backdrop of some women learners' complex life histories and their current context.

Conclusions

This chapter revealed that women learners' aspirations are complex and dynamic and that they are more likely to be changed than realised. The interplay between structures of constraint and a growing sense of agency, as well as becoming immersed in a new social environment, seemed to have a strong influence on the dynamic nature of their aspirations. Some stark differences were noted between groups who had broadly changed their aspirations; those of white ethnic origin were more likely to benefit from changing their aspirations, whereas those whose aspirations were constrained, were more likely to be an ethnic minority, migrant or lone parent. As women learners pursued their aspirations, they referred to structural constraints such as work, care, time, money, and norms that they had to navigate in order to achieve their goals. Those with the greatest sense of agency and ability to bargain were more likely to achieve their aspirations. Interestingly, regardless of whether they achieved the initial aspirations they set out to accomplish, women learners overwhelmingly gained in much broader ways such as improved self-confidence, self-esteem and happiness. This was most striking for the women had returned to education to make a 'fresh start'.

Chapter Seven - Discussion

Introduction

This study set out with the aim of exploring why women return to FE and what they hope to achieve from doing so. The research questions arose from my curiosity about why the sector has historically been so densely populated by women returners, especially given that they are deemed a poor return on investment (Jenkins, Vignoles, Wolf and Galindo-Rueda, 2003; Jenkins, 2006, 2017; Blanden, Buscha, Sturgis and Urwin, 2012). Moreover, in the context of austerity policy which saw a reduction in funding, course cuts and a sharp decline in adult learner numbers, I wanted to understand what attracted women learners to the English FE sector.

I noted the paucity of contemporary empirical research with women learners in the FE sector in the literature review. I examined the available literature on FE and gendered choices, women learners' experiences and feminist policy critiques, as well as the limited literature on women learners' aspirations specifically. It was these empirical and theoretical gaps in our knowledge on women learners' aspirations that led me to consider an emerging body of literature (Hart, 2012, 2016; Gale and Parker, 2015; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale, 2015; DeJaeghere, 2018) which utilises Appadurai's (2005) and Ray's theories on aspirations (2006; Genicot and Ray, 2017) within a capabilities framing (Sen, 1985, 1999). This literature has responded to critique that the CTA pays too little attention to structure by using sociological theories to explain the relationship between aspirations, agency and structure. In the case of this study, I sought an appropriate feminist theory that could explain the complexity of women learners' aspirations, and in doing so I realised that there were synergies between feminist policy critiques on 'choice' and the potential of feminist economics theories to

explain the relationship between aspirations, the gendered structures of constraint (SoC) and agency.

In what follows, I draw together the threads of discussion from the previous findings chapters to illustrate the journeys women learners took towards their goals. At the same time, it is important to note that the route was not always linear (from A to B) as this chronological structure might suggest, but rather, it was dynamic, emergent, future-orientated and always shaped by the past. This chapter starts by considering how women learners' aspirations were formed, then moves on to discuss the ways in which SoC and agency influence women learners' journey towards their aspirations, as well as their 'capacity to aspire'.

Planning the route: The 'capacity to aspire'

Women learners' aspirations have featured in various education studies in the FE and HE sectors, but most often, they have only focused on what their aspirations are (McGiveney, 1993a; Parr, 1996; Reay, 2003; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). While this is important, the processes involved in forming, enacting and the realisation of aspirations and the relationship between agency, aspirations and structures remains unexamined. A small but emerging body of literature on youth aspirations have drawn on Appadurai's 'capacity to aspire' (2004) and more specifically, Ray's conceptual tools (2003; 2006) to explore the complex relationship between aspirations, agency and structure within a variety of contexts (Hart, 2016; Ongera, 2016; Walker, 2018; Mkwananzi, 2019). Until now, these have not been deployed in the English FE context or with 'adult women learners'.

Appadurai (2004) describes how the CTA is a 'navigational capacity' where one has the ability to imagine an alternative future and plan with others the route map to achieve their goals, which is strongly influenced by the agency and resources one has, as well

as being most developed in those who are privileged in society. In terms of the CTA in education, Gale and Parker (2015) theorise that the 'navigational capacity' is influenced by the depth and types of knowledge[123] that learners have about what to do to achieve their aspirations.

The CTA urges us to focus on learners' "future tending impulses" (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale, 2015) and navigational capacity, however, it pays little attention to the ways that aspirations are constructed in the present having been shaped by past experiences(DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwananzi, 2019). This is important because it helps us to make judgements about the extent to which women learners have the CTA, I addressed these omissions by critically examining what their aspirations (IA) were when when they started their course following Mkwananzi (2019; Walker and Fongwa, 2017; see also Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018a, 2018b; Walker, 2018; 2019). I used Ray's tools (2006; 'Aspirations Window' and 'Aspirations Gap') to explain how adult women learners' aspirations were formed and enacted. The biographies shared by women learners provided rich contextual background information about what in their recent past had led them to return to education, as well as other factors which had shaped their educational aspirations.

Initial aspirations

The women in this study expressed *initial aspirations* at the start of their course which have been categorised as instrumental, pragmatic, status, vocational and integrative aspirations. They were not as simplistic as these classifications might suggest, rather, learners held multiple initial aspirations which combined in complex ways to reflect their past and present life experiences, as well as their future goals. To some degree,

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[123] 'Tour knowledge' relates to whether learners know their way to achieve their aspirations by the instruction from another (A to B), and 'map knowledge' relates to when they have a clear idea of how to achieve their aspirations from the outset and know the route to get there – as well as being able to navigate any changes.

these classifications are consistent with those found in other studies with adult women (and male) learners (Parr, 1996, 2000; Reay, Ball and David, 2002; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010), especially instrumental, status and pragmatic aspirations. The fact that all the learners [124] in this study aspired to gain qualifications and/or employment (instrumental aspirations), supports the dominant policy discourse on VET. However, instrumental aspirations were always held in conjunction with a couple of (or few) others and did not reflect the hierarchy of aspirations hinted at in Hart's (2012) study on youth aspirations, or by those which have sought to explain how men and women learners' aspirations differ in this regard (Reay, Ball and David, 2002; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). This suggests that from the outset, women learners' aspirations are complex and multidimensional.

On the surface, women learners' initial aspirations may have appeared to be individual, but they were frequently constructed with others (the collective) in mind, whether they were conscious of this or not. This collective focus was most evident in the expression of '*instrumental aspirations'* by mothers who wanted to provide a better standard of living or future for their children, and in *'pragmatic aspirations'* where learners' seemed to make a course choice partly on the basis that they would be able to support their children's schooling.[125] Collective aspirations extended beyond their immediate family or social network to include others, particularly with regards to '*vocational aspirations'* where learners shared a strong desire to 'give something back' or make a difference to others' lives (as counsellors, teaching assistants, hairdressers, nurses or health care workers). The socially situated nature of learners' aspirations supports the findings of other studies (Edwards, 1993; Parr, 1996; Reay, 2003; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Conradie, 2013), who argue that learners construct and enact their aspirations in the thick of social life.

[124] As cited by all the respondents in their first interview.
[125] I discuss later how pragmatic aspirations could also be considered a SoC.

The majority of women learners' initial aspirations were consistent with those articulated in other studies. However, the *vocational* and *integrative* aspirations offered new insights into what the participants hoped to achieve from returning to college. Integrative aspirations make an important contribution because they bring into sharp relief the vital role that FE/VET plays in the broader aspirations held by migrant women learners beyond gaining qualifications and employment. 'V*ocational aspirations'* tended to be 'gendered' which to some extent, resonates with earlier research on the ways that opportunities in FE reproduce gender. However, I would argue that women learners who identified 'vocational aspirations' had actively chosen to return to FE, often in the context of very challenging circumstances with a strong conviction and determination to achieve, which reflects a great deal of agency.

As a concept, 'initial aspirations' helped to map out the goals that women learners held at the start of their course, which could be categorised into five different groups. Learners' initial aspirations were broader than these individual categories suggest, meaning that their initial aspirations were reflected in multiple categories and intersected in complex ways that defied simple typologies. Nonetheless, these categories contribute a new perspective on what constitutes women learners' aspirations at the outset and their complexities.

Through the aspirations window

Even though aspirations are orientated towards the future (Appadurai, 2004; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale, 2015; Hart, 2016), they are formed in the present (Mkwananzi, 2019) and influenced by past experiences (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale, 2015), as well as being shaped by social factors. Learners' life histories offered a useful starting point for understanding how they formed aspirations and what past experiences had shaped their lives. Each learner biography is unique, but despite the complex nature of women learners' life histories and the themes contained within them, they resonated with similar findings in many of the other studies about women

learners' experiences (Edwards, 1993; Parr, 1996; Merrill, 1999; Reay, 2003; Waller, 2010; Wright, 2013; Webber, 2015; Smith, 2017). And yet, this study adds a contemporary analysis which not only focuses on aspirations in relation to experiences, but also foregrounds the heterogeneity and diversity of women learners in FE.

Ray's (2003; 2006) 'aspirations window' and 'aspirations gap' provides a framework for understanding how aspirations are formed in the present as well as the socially embedded nature of aspiration formation. The biographies revealed the complex and diverse life histories where multiple factors (both positive and negative[126]), had converged which led them back into education. Although these are different to those experienced by students in other contexts (Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018; Mkwananzi, 2019), the complexity is similar. For the women learners in this study, education seems to offer a familiar anchor point at various periods in their life when change is desired or in response to a crisis, as well as offering a 'fresh start'.

The 'aspirations window' helps us to understand the socially situated nature of aspirations formation for women learners and the essential role that others can play in helping them to consider educational opportunities. This contrasts with Hart's (2016) assertion about youth aspirations which have not been formed independently of others are not 'real' or 'true', which perhaps reflects that women learners not only have more agency and life experience and better route knowledge than youths, but also that social influences are very much a part of their decision-making processes.

[126] For example, relationship separation, divorce, migration, unemployment, mental health problems etc.

Social support networks (e.g., parent/psychiatric nurse) or organised community groups[127], had a vital role to play in prompting the most disadvantaged[128] learners to open their 'aspirations window'. In these cases, their 'aspirations window' seemed to open slowly and tentatively, so that they could see what might be possible for them to do and assess the 'aspirations gap'. This is distinct from those who had prior experience and/or knowledge of FE, HE or work (in England), who were more likely to describe having been inspired by friends or acquaintances to engage in education. This suggests that their 'aspirations window' was partially open to the possibilities which might be available to them and that their 'map knowledge' is more developed. Finally, there were a small minority of women learners who were not influenced by others to open their 'aspirations window' but a change in personal circumstances such as having children, being made redundant or wanting to make a fresh start had been the catalyst, and their previous experiences of education meant that they already had 'map knowledge' of routes into education.

The Aspirations Journey

Gender and the Structures of Constraint

Whilst aspirations are dynamic and socially situated, the CTA is affected by both agency and structure (DeJaeghere, 2018), and using feminist economics theories on Structures of Constraint (SoC) helps to overcome the critique that the CTA pays too little attention to structure. It does so in a gender focused way which facilitates an analysis of how structural constraints were experienced intersectionally by the diverse women in this study.

[127] For example, mother and baby sessions and women's groups, as well as addiction, mental health recovery, refugee, or new migrant groups.

[128] Such as migrants, those with mental health difficulties or recovering from addiction.

The competing demands of care and study have been highlighted in a variety of studies with women learners, mostly concerning the ways that they balance home life and study with their spouses/partners (e.g., Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Parr, 2000; Brine and Waller, 2004; Waller, 2010b; Duckworth, 2013; Wright, 2013; Smith, 2017). Similar tensions were noted in this study. However, possibly because of the diversity of care responsibilities and the study's focus on aspirations, they were much more likely to refer to care responsibilities as though they were managing them on their own, even if they were partnered. Furthermore, this study revealed how women learners meticulously planned their complex care arrangements to ensure that they could study. However, in spite of this, sometimes the unpredictable nature of care responsibilities (pressures) affected some women learners' journeys towards their aspirations. These challenges tended to be experienced most acutely by those who worked alongside study, lone mothers and migrants. These women showed a great deal of resilience in managing the nexus of care, work and study.

Although most of the women in this study of FE were not engaged in paid labour during their course, around a third were engaged in part-time work and a couple were doing unpaid work placements as part of their course. Folbre (1994, 2004) notes the complex ways that paid labour, care work, time and money combine to act as a gendered (and intersectional) structure of constraint. Gendered, low paid and sometimes precarious jobs, appeared to negatively affect women learners' CTA and their navigational capacity. This was experienced most acutely by those who were lone parents and/or migrants. Financial hardship was prevalent amongst women learners in this study, regardless of whether they were in paid employment or not. For those who were married or cohabiting, this was most likely to be temporary[129]; in contrast, the

[129] Temporary financial hardship included the increased costs of care, being out of the labour market or redundancy.

CTA of lone parents, migrants or those who identified as an ethnic minority[130], was the most significantly hampered by long-term poverty and debt.

The CTA seemed to be influenced by ***norms***, which for some women learners, were in tension with their individual ***preferences***. Even though identifying which 'norms' all the individual women in this study live by is problematic – not least of which because they are dynamic and complex (Pearse and Connell, 2016) and can be redefined (Folbre, 1994). And yet, there were some common threads around the feelings of parental guilt and responsibility while pursuing their own aspirations which mirrored other studies (Burke, 2002; Reay, 2003; Daniels, 2010; Stone and O'Shea, 2013). Arguably, those women learners with 'pragmatic aspirations' could have simply been an expression of gendered norms, in their attempts to ensure that they did not neglect their responsibilities while pursuing their own life goals. However, there were other women who also experienced these tensions between norms and preferences, who had started their course determined to separate their study from home life so that their children would not 'miss out'. However, in their attempts to achieve their aspirations gap, they rationalised that they had to make adjustments and that their preferences were not only important to them but benefitted their children also. This study differs from other studies in that it pays closer attention to the relationship between aspirations and norms, and illustrates how these change over time as learners become closer to realising their aspirations.

The CTA of a minority of recently migrated women learners were affected by various **rules** or legislation. Although 'rules' are not aimed at women specifically, when combined with other factors such as care, money, norms, and preferences, they tend to have a 'gendered' effect. Due to the size and diversity of the sample, there was not a consensus of the ways that women learners' CTA was affected by explicit rules.

[130] In some cases, these intersectional disadvantages combined.

Therefore, it is only possible to make tentative observations and suggest that this is an area that would benefit from further investigation. There are strict rules about who can access public funding in FE[131], who can claim public funds such as social support and who has the right to work and what qualifications are equivalent[132], which affected women learners' CTA in complex ways, depending on their circumstances. FE funding rules meant that some women had to wait until they could pursue their education, which was problematic because it stalled some learners' aspirations to gain work, as well as much-needed independence and social integration. Some women learners who had gained qualifications or work experience before migrating, had to leave their prior aspirations behind as their previously gained qualifications were not always equivalent and gaining equivalence sometimes hampered the CTA.

Agency and bargaining

The CTA emphasises the role that agency (as well as structures) plays in acting towards aspirations. Most of the studies on the relationship between aspirations and agency are in the context of youth (Gale and Parker, 2015; DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018), whose educational aspirations and agency can be strongly influenced by adults according to Hart (2016). The gendered analyses of aspirations and agency with girls (DeJaeghere, 2018) and young women (Walker, 2018; see also Mkwananzi, 2019) theorise that the women in their studies are expressing agency by pursuing their aspirations while navigating structural constraints. While these are helpful, the context of this thesis is different with regards to opportunities for women to engage in education and the possible ways in which they express agency, which

[131] The criteria for funding eligibility for non-EEA citizens are complex: migrants must have permission granted to live in the UK and have been a citizen for 3 years; refugees can access funding immediately if they have discretionary leave, exceptional leave, indefinite leave or humanitarian protection; and asylum seekers can access funding if they have been in the UK for six months or are appealing a decision to grant asylum. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/414797/Funding_Rules_v2_March_2015.pdf

[132] Dependant on their migrant status.

must be acknowledged. Therefore, I deployed feminist economics theories on agency, bargaining and sense of agency to complement those used to frame the Structures of Constraint (SoC).

Agency has been conceptualised in relation to the ways that women learners negotiate the SoC using bargaining processes so that they can pursue their aspirations, as well as in the ways they embody and enact agency. The women learners in this study used various forms of 'bargaining' to ensure that they could pursue their educational goals which involve cooperation, conflict, subversion, bargaining, resistance, influence, and persuasion (Katz, 1997; Kabeer, 1999b, 1999a). Sometimes this was as extreme as leaving oppressive relationships because they were unable to resolve conflict – some of which they attributed to the pursuit of their educational aspirations. Mostly though, women learners demonstrated agency in subtle ways in their everyday negotiations about issues such as care, time, study and gendered norms with others in their 'household unit' through cooperation, persuasion and influence during their course. The dynamic and emergent nature of agency was observed as women became more likely to renegotiate and redefine implicit gender norms so that they could achieve or expand their aspirations.

As well as these tangible expressions of agency, women learners universally reflected on how they had changed and grown in agency since they started the course. Kabeer (1999; 2008) defines this feeling as a "sense of agency" or "power within", where they were not only able to pursue their aspirations but had an increased sense of "consciousness" about what they are capable of (Kabeer, 2008), both within an education context but also in the broadest sense. Those who had the most harrowing and difficult life histories gave the longest reflections about how pursuing their educational aspirations had contributed to them feeling more empowered, more confident and described feeling more hopeful about their future, especially those who had been significantly affected by mental health problems. Moreover, most women

learners reflected on how education had nurtured their aspirations, which they felt not only made them better role models for their children, but also competent at dealing with their children's schools in ways that they had not been able to before.

The realisation of aspirations (or not)

The findings of this study support the assertion that aspirations are dynamic, socially situated, and emergent and are affected in complex ways by both agency and structure (Gale and Parker, 2015; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale, 2015; DeJaeghere, 2018; Mkwananzi and Wilson-Strydom, 2018; Mkwananzi, 2019). However, in order to make a judgement about the extent to which learners have the CTA, their aspirations at the start of the course need to be comprehensively understood. I have conceptualised this as *initial aspirations,* which are rarely singular but multidimensional. In taking this approach, women learners had the opportunity to voice what they were hoping to gain from engaging in education and why they were there. The majority of women learners had either realised or changed their *initial aspirations* by the end of the course, which supports the findings of other aspirations studies that followed learners through their study. It was most common for women learners to change their initial aspirations, rather than realise or achieve them. Sometimes changes to aspirations were a negative consequence, such as constrained aspirations (narrowed, failed or adapted). In contrast, emergent aspirations where they were changed for similar goals or those whose aspirations had expanded or what Ray terms 'slide forward' (Loots and Walker, 2015),were more positive.

The journey towards aspirations is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, and although the findings of this study highlight the relationship between gendered SoC, agency, biographies and aspirations, there did not always appear to be a direct and linear relationship between these factors with regards to learners achieving their aspirations (or not). At the same time, there seemed to be a few patterns in the data that highlighted the ways that women with certain intersectional disadvantages (see table

5 in the methodology chapter) had a reduced CTA or more 'brittle horizons' (Appadurai, 2004). I expected to see this relationship between those who had achieved their aspirations versus those whose aspirations were constrained, and although it was not clear-cut, there was evidence to suggest that those who had constrained aspirations were more likely than any other group to describe having pursued a vocational course in FE because they needed a fresh start, as well as being more likely to be from an ethnic minority, a lone parent or a migrant. In contrast, white working-class women were more likely to have the flexibility, CTA and navigational capacity to change their aspirations in positive ways for similar (emerged) or better (expanded) aspirations, despite experiencing other forms of disadvantage[133]. More specifically, it was only white working-class women[134] who seemed to have this flexible navigational capacity. In addition to the obvious ethnic differences, other potential explanations include the possibility that the type of course and course delivery helped to foster learners' aspirations (these learners were either on Access courses or Animal Management), that they had a stronger navigational capacity or 'map knowledge' (Gale and Parker, 2015) because of previous experiences in the FE/HE sector as adults, and that their aspirations were nurtured with the support of tutors and the college.

Aspirations have been the primary focus of this research, yet it is important to consider the broader unanticipated gains from participating in FE for women learners such as: gaining more confidence in dealing with their children's schools, inspiring others to engage in education, improved self-confidence and mood which emerged throughout the study. These gains are promising, particularly given the context of some women learners' difficult and harrowing biographies. Even though the broader

[133] Lone parents, working or had a disability.

[134] Although white working-class women were over-represented in the emerged or expanded aspirations groups, only half of the white women were in this group and the rest were evenly distributed across all the other aspiration groups.

benefits of study for adult learners have been documented (e.g., Schuller et al., 2000; Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000; Field, 2005; Duckworth and Smith, 2018), their relationship to the formation or realisation of aspirations has not yet been considered. This is an interesting point because the majority of women learners were not always conscious of the broader benefits that education might bring to their lives beyond achieving their initial aspirations. This supports the theory of the dynamic and socially situated nature of aspirations, where they emerge as part of an individual's educational journey as they grow in agency. Encouragingly, all the women learners experienced the broader benefits of education regardless of whether they had achieved their initial aspirations or not. This suggests that pursuing education helps women in all aspects of their lives, even if they do not meet the instrumental goals of policy discourse by progressing immediately into work or further study. These empirical findings support the theoretical feminist critiques of policy discourse (Gouthro, 2005; Blackmore, 2006; Leathwood, 2006; Daniels, 2010), as well as feminist economic debates regarding the 'consumption benefits' of education (Strober, 2003, 2005), and the call for a 'social provisioning approach' which takes a broader account of women's lived realities where well-being, agency and flourishing are valued over, or at least equally, to productivity (Power, 2004).

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter has been to draw together the threads of discussion introduced in the findings chapters, paying special attention to what these mean overall. I argued that in order to judge the extent to which learners have the 'capacity to aspire', it is important to understand what their aspirations are at the outset. Conceptualising learners' 'initial aspirations' in this way in combination with Ray's tools (2003; 2006), help to frame the ways aspirations are formed and enacted in the present within the 'aspirations window', with the future goals or 'aspirations gap' in mind. Although aspirations are formed in the present, they are shaped by prior experiences, and women learners' complex biographies revealed how they can act as a catalyst for returning to FE. Educational aspirations might be thought of as an individual pursuit, but they are always formed and enacted in the social world and with others in mind.

To compensate for the lack of attention to structure in the CTA, I have drawn heavily from feminist economic theories on choice and women's ability to pursue their life goals. A feminist economic lens brings into sharp relief the complex negotiations regarding care, work, time, money, gender norms, rules and preferences women learners from diverse backgrounds have to make so that they can engage in education. The feminist economics lens not only allows us to focus on the gendered SoC, but makes visible how other intersectional disadvantages impact women learners' navigational capacity. Moreover, they help us to explore the ways that women use their agency in the process of 'bargaining' and how their 'sense of agency' develops as they become aware of their abilities.

I concluded this chapter by discussing how women learners' aspirations are not static or fixed, but rather dynamic and socially situated with most learners' aspirations

changing in some way during their course. The extent to which women learners had realised their aspirations or not cannot simply be attributed to the constraints that they had to navigate (such as work, care, time, money, norms and preferences). However, the findings did suggest an interesting relationship between aspirations which had changed in some way and intersectional characteristics of disadvantage. More specifically, those learners whose aspirations had mobilised downwards were more likely to be an ethnic minority or a migrant, and in contrast, white working class women were more likely to have aspirations that had expanded or emerged. Finally, the increased understanding of the nature and processes involved in women learners' aspirations and how they navigate towards them is valuable knowledge. Against the backdrop of austerity and some women's difficult backgrounds, the broader benefits of education that the women in this study gained regardless of whether they achieved their aspirations emphasises the complex and significant role that VET played in their lives.

Chapter Eight – Conclusions

Introduction

The foreword from the Kennedy Review (1997) highlighting the value of FE at the beginning of this thesis formed the starting point for charting the historical context of women learners in FE in chapter one. Kennedy's broad vision of FE as being able to serve the dual aims of social as well as economic mobility of the most educationally marginalised individuals was significant for women, and this led to a significant rise in adult women learners in FE. Although the drastic decline in the numbers of women learners which have followed can be attributed to multiple factors, it is evident that policy discourse has shifted in emphases towards productivity, competitiveness, and economic return on investment, and in the process, the broad vision of FE that Kennedy advocated for has been eroded. Against this backdrop, women are not only deemed a poor return on investment (Jenkins, Vignoles, Wolf and Galindo-Rueda, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Blanden, Buscha, Sturgis and Urwin, 2012), but the resultant funding cuts has almost reduced women learners to invisibility in policy and research terms, and yet they still represent a significant majority of learners in the sector. In response to these silences, and in the context of austerity, I wanted to understand why women return to FE and what their aspirations were.

In the literature review (chapter two), I argued that there was a paucity of research specifically on women learners in FE, and although women learners' experiences are explored in the broader field of education, it only vaguely refers to aspirations. Therefore, I turned to an emerging body of literature on aspirations and discussed the synergies with theoretical literature on gendered choice from the field of feminist economics. In chapter three, I critically discussed the conceptual tools that I would be using to frame the process of forming aspirations and the journey towards them using the CTA, and how structure and agency would be more closely examined using

theoretical concepts from feminist economics. In the methodology chapter (chapter four), I critically considered how my feminist epistemology had shaped this thesis and discussed the importance of a methodological approach which would foreground women learners’ voices about what their hopes were for the future. Chapters five and six presented the findings of my research study in chronological order; chapter five concentrated on learners' initial aspirations and the factors which had influenced them to return to FE, and chapter six concentrated on how learners navigated towards their aspirations, the outcomes of their efforts and the extent to which their aspirations had changed over time. These two findings chapters were synthesised in chapter seven and I concluded that women learners' aspirations were complex, dynamic and socially situated and that their CTA was strongly shaped by gendered SoC, intersectional disadvantages and agency.

Having provided a brief introduction of the research and a reminder of the thesis chapters, I now turn to the central research questions and some of the key findings. Following this, the contributions of the study, the implications, the limitations, and recommendations for future research will be discussed in turn. Finally, I make a short commentary about how women have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and how FE might support them as part of a post-pandemic recovery strategy.

The Research Question

The purpose of this research was to determine:

> What are the aspirations of adult women learners who participate in VET in the English Further Education Sector?

With the following sub-questions:

- What are the aspirations of women learners who return to FE?
- How do women learners form their aspirations?
- Do /how do women learners' aspirations change over time?
- What are the barriers to pursuing their aspirations and how do women learners navigate them?

In what follows, the research aims are used as a device to structure some of the key findings from my research.

1. What are the aspirations of women learners who return to FE?

In chapter four, I discussed how taking a longitudinal approach enabled me to explore learners' aspirations along with their biographies at the start of their course. This approach differed to most of the previous studies on women learners' aspirations, in that it distinctly focused on their aspirations at the start of their course (Reay, Ball and David, 2002; Reay, 2003) and followed them over time. Asking learners to define what their aspirations were at the start of the course was important because it gave an insight into the types of aspirations that were important to women learners who participate in FE and enables us to consider the extent to which women learners have the CTA.

I have termed the early aspirations voiced by learners as 'initial aspirations', which I have categorised *as instrumental, pragmatic, vocational, status and integrative aspirations*. Importantly, learners' aspirations did not neatly fall into a single category

but rather, learners held multiple initial aspirations which intertwined in complex ways, which reflects the complexity and diversity of their biographies and what prompted them to return to FE. Learners always voiced Instrumental aspirations which resonates with other studies and supports policy discourse. However, this was always held in combination with other aspirations, which they discussed at length and with more passion. Based on previous research, I had not anticipated that learners would discuss the vocational or integrative nature of their initial aspirations, or that they would describe them with such strength and feeling. This offers a new and interesting perspective, which suggests that learners place a great deal of hope and trust that FE can support these aspirations. Women learners' initial *aspirations* helps us to understand their future goals, and yet as I will argue, it is the process of forming and working towards those goals that is particularly important.

2: Do/how do women learners form their aspirations?

Learner biographies formed a key part of the first interview. Life grids were utilised as a tool with participants to help them recall key life events which formed the basis of our discussions about how they felt that these had shaped their educational (and life) trajectory, as well as their future aspirations. Learners' biographies were complex, and like the learners in Marandet and Wainwright's HE study (2010), most learners' educational aspirations had been formed in response to changes to personal circumstances. In this study, a high proportion of learners had been driven to return to college because they were keen to make a 'fresh start' and move forward from the harrowing experiences (of abuse, mental health issues, poverty, relationship difficulties and addiction amongst others) which had characterised their lives. Even though aspirations are future oriented, they are always shaped by learners' past experiences, both negative and positive (Zipin et al., 2015).

Ray's Aspirations Window and Aspirations Gap (2003; 2006) have been utilised to explain the cognitive and social processes involved in forming aspirations. Previously, I

discussed how learners' aspirations are developed in response to a crisis point or feeling dissatisfied with their lives. Ray's metaphor of the aspirations window helps to explain how women learners who felt dissatisfied, were in crisis or had been displaced, started to look at new possibilities for their lives. At this point, some women learners described assessing and testing out the options available to them, in order to give themselves the best chance of achieving their 'aspirations gap' – or where they are now versus where they want to be. Aspirations are individually held, but Ray reminds us that they are formed in the thick of social life and this was evident in the ways that women learners were encouraged in various ways to look out of their 'aspirations window' by others – sometimes by friends but often by professionals as part of their recovery. Finally, a number of women learners described their aspirations as though they had always been in their peripheral view, which came into sharper focus as they started to move forward.

3. How do learners' aspirations change over time?

By the second interview (towards the end of their course), learners were in a position to reflect upon how their journey towards their aspirations had transpired and if there had been any changes to their goals along the way. Appadurai describes this journey as 'navigational capacity', which helps us to identify how and why women learners' aspirations changed over time. The addition of Gale and Parker's (2015) conceptualisation of the CTA, which draws on de Certeau's (1984) 'route knowledge' and map 'knowledge', is useful for framing the differences in navigational capacity.

There was a strong tendency for learners' initial aspirations to change by the end of their course. However, although change was more prominent than stasis, around a third of the learners successfully navigated towards their aspirations and did not deviate from their original goals. While change was experienced in all directions – upwards (expanded), laterally (emerged) or downwards (constrained), there were notable differences between these groups. More specifically, white working-class

women learners were more likely to have changed their aspirations to ones that were better or similar, whereas women who had migrated, were from a BME community and/or lone mothers, were more likely to have constrained their aspirations. The navigational capacity offers one explanation about the potential differences in knowledge and experience of the route to take towards their aspirations, and yet I found that the navigational capacity was greatly enhanced by the support of others (especially teachers), which echoes DeJaeghere's (2018) suggestion that aspirations can be nurtured. At the same time, and in concert with other criticisms about the CTA, there needs to be closer attention paid to the role of structure and agency.

An important finding that was clear from the data was that although the focus of this study was specifically on aspirations, learners had gained in many other unexpected ways in terms of self-confidence, mood and sense of agency, which seemed to occur irrespective of whether they had achieved their aspirations.

4. What are the barriers to pursuing their aspirations and how do women learners navigate them?

Women learners reflected on the barriers that they had to overcome in order to pursue their aspirations at the second interview. They described difficulties relating to gender norms and expectations, time, poverty, care responsibilities, and work. While other studies with women learners have identified that they experience similar barriers to study (Parr, 2000; Burke, 2002; Reay, 2003; Wright, 2013; Smith, 2017), they have not specifically framed these in relation to aspirations or choice. Folbre's (1994) gendered structures of constraint on choice offers tools which help us to theorise the everyday obstacles that women face in order to study (such as managing time to study, childcare arrangements, finance, inconsistent work schedules, the demands of work, and gender norms). In addition, they urge us to consider how these are compounded by other intersectional disadvantages such as age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, migration status, parental status and marital status. This

theoretical approach highlighted patterns in the data which showed that those who worked, were lone parents, from an ethnic minority, a migrant or disabled were likely to experience constraints on choice more acutely.

Encouragingly, even though some women learners experienced significant constraints, this did not them stop them from pursuing their aspirations. Far from it; they found ways to do so. Feminist economics draws on 'bargaining theory' to explain the ways that women use their agency to pursue their choices using cooperation and conflict, as well as resistance, subversion, persuasion, and influence (Agarwal, 1997; Katz, 1997; Kabeer, 1999a). In the processes of navigating these constraints and by the end of their course, women learners were not only demonstrating agency by acting in their own interests, but they had become conscious of what they were capable of and embodied a growing 'sense of agency' which was characterised by increased confidence, improved self-esteem and a strong sense of empowerment.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study offers the following contributions to knowledge theoretically and empirically:

- The paucity of contemporary research with women learners in FE has been noted throughout. This thesis makes a contemporary empirical contribution to our knowledge about the diversity of women who participate in FE/VET and what prompts them to do so. More specifically, it focuses on how they are able to engage in study and navigate towards their aspirations against the backdrop of austerity and funding cuts.
- Secondly, it contributes to an emerging body of literature on aspirations which uses Appadurai's CTA (2004) and Ray's AW/AG (2003/2006) to explain how aspirations are formed and enacted (e.g., DeJaeghere, 2016; Mkwannazi, 2019), and includes feminist economics theories on gendered structures of constraint on

choice to offer a structural account which is lacking in the CTA. Although these theoretical perspectives may seem an unlikely combination, they share a similar critique on 'rational choice theory' which forms the basis of theories on 'choices' and 'aspirations'.

- Thirdly, the aspirations model which I presented in chapter three (figure 7, see below) conveys a visual representation of the relationship between aspirations, agency and structure, as well as the concepts used in the theoretical and empirical chapters. This model shows that women learners' aspirations are not linear but are dynamically shaped by agency and structures on an ongoing basis. More specifically, it illustrates the complex set of constraints which can impact on women learners' aspirations and the extent to which they have agency to pursue their own goals.

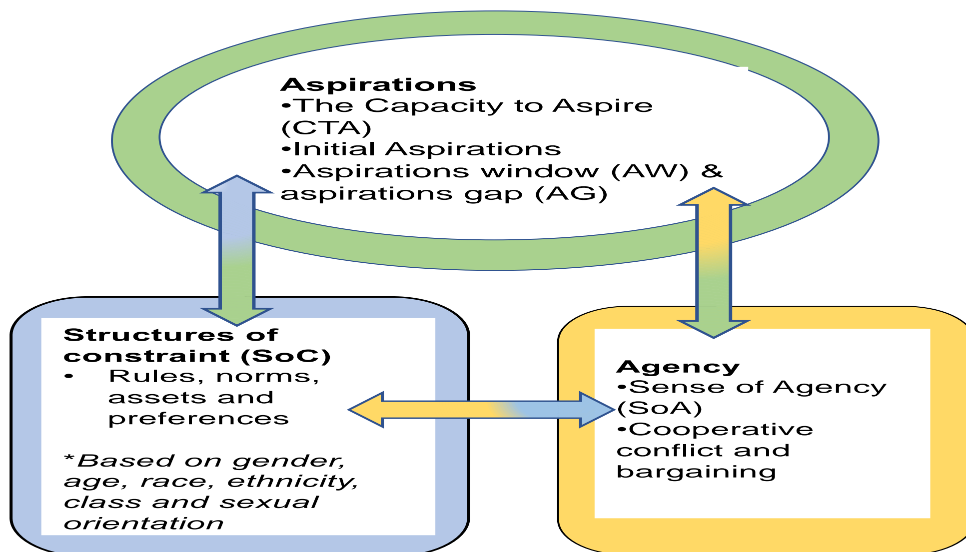

Figure 7: Aspirations model

- Fourthly, utilising feminist economics to examine the lived experiences of women learners helps us to understand the gendered constraints that they navigate in order to pursue their aspirations (e.g., norms, preferences, care, work, money and time), and how these are compounded by other intersections of disadvantage[135]. Feminist critiques on the lifelong learning sector have urged us to reframe women learners in relation to their everyday realities, and not the policy discourse of choice, productivity, and individualism, but to date, this has not been utilised empirically in VET research. Consequently, in taking this alternative framing, it sharpens the focus on the 'consumption benefits' (broader gains) of vocational education for women learners.

- Finally, feminist economic theories on 'bargaining' offer an alternative perspective in this context on the multiple ways that women use their agency to resist gender norms, so that they can pursue their goals through resistance, subversion, negotiation, conflict, cooperation, and persuasion (Katz, 1997; Kabeer, 1999b, 1999a). Moreover, Kabeer's (1999) theories on 'sense of agency' offers insights about how engaging in learning contributes to 'a change in consciousness' about what they are capable of as they begin to embody agency.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers

Women learners' aspirations are consistent with those of the dominant discourse of policy makers, in that they are engaging in FE with hopes of achieving qualifications and gaining financial independence. However, this only reflects a small proportion of

[135] E.g., ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, race, marital status, parental status, migration status and disability.

their goals. Thus, policy which values narrow instrumental goals fails to appreciate the broader goals that women have for their lives.

Women learners are a heterogenous group in terms of the range of vocational courses they select, the diverse inequalities they experience and the reasons why the return to college. There was a broad cross-section of women learners in this study who were attracted to FE in order to rebuild their lives, either after a personal crisis or having sustained long term difficulties associated with abuse, addiction, mental health problems, relationship breakdown or migration. For many of these women, education was viewed as a 'fresh start' which offered them hope of improving not only their own lives but that of their families too. The plights of some of these women highlight the importance of a 'gendered analyses' of policy changes, and the need to consider the effects on this group – especially those which result in funding cuts.

Women learners' educational biographies or trajectories are not linear; rather, they are characterised by gaps such as: missed schooling and failed attempts at post-compulsory education. Consequently, their return to education is not linear either and often, they need to revisit qualifications at levels they already hold in order to progress onto higher qualifications, particularly Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications. Thus, women who are trying to lift themselves out of poverty against the backdrop of funding cuts, may find repeating qualification levels that they already hold difficult to access because of financial constraints.

While the most recent review of post-compulsory education by Augar (2019) highlighted the decline in participation in Level 2 and 3 qualifications by adults which he linked a raft of policy changes, funding cuts and the introduction of adult learning loans, his analysis does not examine the gendered (and intersectional) impacts of these cuts. Some of Augar's recommendations formed the basis of the most recent white paper 'Skills for Jobs' (Department for Education, 2021), which makes various

pledges to improve funding and opportunities for adults in targeted ways such as funding for a first Level 3 qualification as part of the 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee' from 2021-2022.[136] Although these policy changes will go some way to improving opportunities for some learners and potentially support adults in higher technical roles, there is no evidence of this improving the life chances for those wishing to retrain at the lower levels (Level 1 or 2) and this fails to understand what women learners want or need from FE. Therefore, I recommend that policy makers commission a fine-grained quantitative analysis of the gendered (and intersectional) impact of the various components of 'Lifetime skills guarantee', which concentrates on both local and national level data.

On a related point, it is logical that public funding spent on VET and FE seeks to achieve a return on investment, and particularly so in the context of austerity. However, this narrow focus on productivity renders the unpaid care work that women primarily do and the complex reasons why they return to FE invisible. At the same time, it fails to acknowledge the potential 'consumption benefits' of education for women (and their families) and what they stand to gain beyond qualifications and economic security. Therefore, in agreement with feminist and feminist economic critiques, I call for policy makers to consider 'reframing' their analysis using a 'social provisioning approach', which offers a broader definition of women learners' well-being beyond the economic and values the vital contribution they make in providing the necessities for sustaining human life (unpaid care work). I recognise that this would be a 'giant step' (Strober, 2005) however, it could provide a more accurate perspective of the value of education for women beyond gaining qualifications.

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[136] As well as access to English, Maths and Digital Skills courses and loans for adults for up to four years with a focus on higher level technical skills.

Future Research

The literature review noted the limited attention that has been paid to race and ethnicity in research on the FE/VET sector, as well as the problematic official data on race in the FE sector which makes exploring patterns and trends over time difficult. Relatedly, although it was possible to examine data on race, ethnicity and VET in relation to adult learners at an aggregate level (by college and nationally), data on BME women learners specifically are incomplete. And yet, even though only a third of the sample were from BME communities, this is above national averages for the sector. This group are worthy of closer attention because they revealed differences in the ways that they were able to navigate towards their aspirations compared to white women learners, particularly the complex barriers that they faced in order to participate in education and the fact that they are less likely to extend their aspirations. Further research on this group which takes a mixed methods approach would be beneficial. It should focus on the trends and outcomes for this group, as well as their vocational aspirations and how they navigate through training and into employment.

Secondly, and to some extent relatedly, the plight of migrant[137] women learners' education beyond ESOL, is worthy of further investigation to obtain a finer grained gendered (and intersectional) analysis about what courses they aspire to do and how they can be supported into work and/or integrating into society. While this should focus primarily on FE/VET (and ESOL), this is a piece of work that would benefit from an investigation of how migrant women learners understand and are able to navigate the various pathways into education. The national data on migration patterns and demographics are complex, but this further research could focus on the local areas of England which have noted some of the highest levels of migration in recent years and

[137] Including refugees and asylum seekers.

the patterns of participation for women migrant learners across those. Relatedly, some of these issues are starting to be considered by the Greater London Authority (GLA) who have a devolved Adult Education Budget (AEB). Recently, a Senior Policy Analyst for Adult Education from GLA approached me to discuss how they might use a 'gendered' analysis to inform the priorities for the devolved AEB. We talked at length about migrant women and the possibility of a small project which focuses specifically on this group as part of GLAs Post-COVID recovery.

Final thoughts

I set out on a quest to satisfy a long-held curiosity to understand why women return to VET and what their aspirations are. This was based on my experience that few entered employment or further/higher education in a related area immediately. The women in this study have taught me three vital lessons. *Firstly*, women learners who were an ethnic minority, a lone parent and/or migrant had a reduced 'capacity to aspire'. *Secondly,* this study has highlighted to me that regardless of what their aspirations are, women learners gain in ways that are immeasurable in instrumental terms, and these benefits are not only felt by the individual women but have a ripple effect. *Thirdly*, it has led to a deeper understanding of the complex processes involved in forming and pursuing aspirations within the context of their everyday lives. *Finally*, I have heard narratives which are harrowing and some women learners' sheer determination to succeed in the face of such adversity and the value that they place on FE in helping them to rebuild their lives, is both humbling and inspirational.

After thoughts

This thesis is being submitted a year into a global pandemic (COVID19) which has resulted in approximately 120,000 deaths in the UK to date. The pandemic has made visible the fragility of health, the economy, work, and education. The value of 'key work' such as health care and essential retail which is mostly low paid, and overrepresented by women and ethnic minorities, has been brought into sharp relief

during this crisis (Warren and Lyonette, 2020; Warren, Lyonette and Women's Budget Group, 2020; Kabeer, Razavi, Rodgers and Andemic, 2021). Moreover, the latest data reveal that threats to job security have hit women the hardest as they are also more likely to be in the hospitality, retail and service sectors which have been most severely affected by furlough and redundancy (HMRC, 2020; Warren & Lyonette, 2020). The burden of home-schooling, childcare and supporting the clinically vulnerable has predominantly fallen on women during this period (Warren and Lyonette, 2020), which is not always supported by employers and has contributed to high levels of emotional strain, as well as longer working hours (Warren and Lyonette, 2020; Women's Budget Group, London School of Economics, The Fawcett Society and London, 2020; The Guardian, 2021).

Any post-pandemic recovery programmes need to be holistic and take seriously the asymmetric impact that this crisis has had on women and their futures. A special issue of the Journal of Feminist Economics devoted to the topic draws on established debates to highlight how the pandemic has affected women across the world. In it, Heintz et al. (2021) insist that a paradigm shift is needed to deal with the interlocking crises of care, the environment and macroeconomics.

Throughout the pandemic, the WBG[138] have been working hard behind the scenes to continue to make these inequalities visible by lobbying the government to consider a 'care led recovery', to ensure that women are not excluded from 'new jobs'[139] (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2020, 2021). VET has an obvious role to play in retraining women learners for 'new jobs' as part of the economic recovery. More than that, the stories shared by the women learners in this thesis remind us of the broader potential of FE, especially in the opportunities to rebuild and restart their lives after the pandemic. However, this more holistic view of education requires a reimagining of VET

[138] In collaboration with The Fawcett Society and Young Women's Trust.
[139] Such as the 'care economy' and 'new green deal jobs'.

which “refuses a narrow instrumentalism and exclusionary association with waged employment” (Avis et al., 2021, p.13). It is impossible to predict the future, but now more than ever, there is an opportunity to build back better, grounded in feminist economic principles which values the broader conception of well-being and education as part of a ‘social provisioning approach’.

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Appendices

Appendix One – Ethics Information (Participants)

University of Nottingham Research Project: The experiences and aspirations of women learners on vocational courses in the FE sector

Thank you for considering participating in my research project. My name is Rebecca Suart and I am a post-graduate research student in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. I have a special interest in Further Education colleges having worked as a lecturer for a number of years, and my experience of teaching has predominantly been in teaching women who come back to education to study vocational courses.

This research project aims to find out what motivates women learners to choose vocational courses at further education colleges, why they stay on the course and what their career aspirations are. This doctoral study aims to extend our understanding of women learners who return to education in this context.

The research involves the completion of a biographical document (life grid) and a face-to-face interview with the researcher that is expected to last for one hour. Participants will be given the opportunity to complete the life grid before the interview, but if you prefer it can also be completed during the interview with the researcher. The purpose of the life grid is to give a basic overview of your educational history and anything significant that has affected your decisions.

Protecting your personal information and maintaining confidentiality is very important, therefore, all information held that is related to you will not contain your name or college name and be stored securely. The interviews will be recorded using digital technology and later transcribed into documents, these will be stored safely using password protections. Written documents such as the life grids and signed consent forms, will be either stored safely in a locked filing cabinet or scanned electronically and hard copies destroyed. My project supervisor and I will be the only people with access to this data that will be anonymised prior to storage. Any reports or publications of this research in the future will not contain your name and protect your identity.

Participation in the research is completely voluntary and you are at liberty to withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences.

It is not intended that the study will cause any distress, rather it aims to give women learners an opportunity to tell their educational stories and discuss what is important to them and how the FE colleges help them to achieve their aspirations. The researcher will be sensitive and respectful to the participant's story giving an opportunity to discuss both the negative and positive aspects of education.

Key contacts:

Researcher: Rebecca Suart, Email: ttxrmsu@nottingham.ac.uk

Please contact me regarding any queries or concerns regarding either the study or the ethical consent forms attached. I will be the conducting the research and interviews.

Research supervisor is Simon McGrath email: simon.mcgrath@nottingham.ac.uk. Who will be supporting the direction and publication of this study.

Complaints:

In the event of any concern or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, please contact the Research ethics co-ordinator at educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix Two – Ethics Consent Form (Participants)

Project title: The experiences and aspirations of women learners on vocational courses in the FE sector.

Researcher: Rebecca Suart, PhD researcher, University of Nottingham.

Please read the statements of confirmation below and sign if you are in agreement:

- I have been informed about the research project in writing about the purposes of the study.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions by email and in person prior to agreeing to this study.
- I understand I can withdraw at any time without prejudice
- Any information that might potentially identify me will not be used in published material.
- I understand that my interview will be recorded digitally and stored securely.
- I understand that my interview will be transcribed from the recording and stored securely.
- I understand that my completed life grid and this consent form will be locked in a filing cabinet and may be scanned into digital form, but will be stored securely.

I agree to participate in the study outlined to me.

Name of
Participant____________________________________Signature_____________

Date____________________

Appendix Three – Ethics Information (Institutions)

Post Graduate Research Project: The experiences and aspirations of women learners on vocational courses in the FE sector

Dear …..

Let me introduce myself, my name is Rebecca Suart and I am a post-graduate research student in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, my research interest and professional experience is in the Further Education sector. Based on my previous experience of working with adult learners this research project aims to find out what motivates women learners to choose vocational courses at further education colleges, why they stay on the course and what their career aspirations are. This research forms a pilot study for my doctoral thesis which aims to extend our understanding of women learners who return to education in this context.

The research involves conducting interviews on two or three occasions with women learners aged 25+ who are on vocational courses (NQF Levels 1-3), which are expected to last for one hour. The learners will be asked to complete an educational biography either prior to the interview or with the researcher, whichever they prefer. The purpose of the biographical document and interview is to explore the learners' educational history and key decisions which have affected their choice to come back to college alongside what they hope to gain from their qualifications. The research will be conducted in two FE institutions, where a sample of learners from a range of vocational courses and levels can be accessed with the assistance and cooperation of your institution.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my research proposal, I very much hope that you are interested in supporting and taking part in the study. I have attached information relating to consent and ethics, If you have any queries and would like to contact me please email ttxrmsu@nottingham.ac.uk.

Yours faithfully

Rebecca Suart BA (hons), MA, Cert.ed (FE)

Ethical Standards

This research project has obtained ethical approval from the Education Research office at the University of Nottingham and follows a basic set of ethical principles outlined below. These are relevant to both the institution and any participants that are interviewed as part of this study. Included with this letter are consent forms for the institutional contact to sign, in addition, there is a separate information sheet and consent form which will be given to each learner that participates in the interviews.

Maintaining confidentiality and protecting the personal information of the research participants and the institution is very important, therefore, all information held will not contain the name of the participants or college and will be stored securely. The interviews will be recorded using digital technology and later transcribed into documents, these will be stored safely using password protections. Written documents such as the life grids and signed consent forms will be either stored safely in a locked filing cabinet or scanned electronically and hard copies destroyed. My project supervisor and I will be the only people with access to this data that will be anonymised prior to storage. Any reports or publications of this research in the future will not identify the college or the participant.

Participation in the research is completely voluntary and the institution and/or participants are at liberty to withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences. It is not intended that the study will cause any distress, rather it aims to give women learners an opportunity to tell their educational stories and discuss what is important to them and how the FE colleges help them to achieve their aspirations. The researcher will be sensitive and respectful to the participant's story giving an opportunity to discuss both the negative and positive aspects of education.

I have attached ethical information and consent forms for the participants and the institutions in advance and look forward to speaking to you.

Key contacts:

Researcher: Rebecca Suart, Email: ttxrmsu@nottingham.ac.uk

Please contact me regarding any queries or concerns you may have either about the study or the ethical consent forms attached. I will be the one conducting the research and interviews.

My research supervisor is Simon McGrath, who will be supporting the direction and publication of this study. He can be reached by email at:

simon.mcgrath@nottingham.ac.uk.

Complaints:

In the event of any concern or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, please contact the Research ethics co-ordinator at educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix Four - Ethics consent form (Institution)

Project title: The experiences and aspirations of women learners on vocational courses in the FE sector.

Researcher: Rebecca Suart, PhD researcher, University of Nottingham.

Please read the statements of confirmation below and sign below on behalf of the institution if you are in agreement:

- I have been informed about the research project in writing about the purposes of the study.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions by email and in person prior to agreeing to this study on behalf of the institution.
- I understand the institution can withdraw at any time without prejudice.
- Any information that might potentially identify the institution and participants will not be used in published material.
- I understand that participants' interviews will be recorded digitally and stored securely.
- I understand that participants' interviews will be transcribed from the recording and stored securely.
- I understand that the completed life grid and this consent form will be locked in a filing cabinet and may be scanned into digital form, but will be stored securely.

I agree on behalf of the institution to participate in the study outlined to me.

Name of institutional contact___________________________________Signature______________________
_

Position within the institution______________________Date__________________

Appendix Five – Interview questions (first and second interview)

First Interview

- Explain the research project, my background in FE and what stimulated my interest in adult women learners who return to FE. Discuss the longitudinal nature of the project and the plans to interview them twice over their course of study, establish their willingness to be involved be involved in follow-up interviews (mention at the end of the interview too).

- Discuss the ethics information, check their understanding, and give them an opportunity to ask any questions. Reassure them that they can decline to answer questions if they prefer or ask for any information which they have disclosed to be 'off record'.

- Explain the structure of the first interview, which will initially focus on the completing the life grid with them and then there will be some semi-structured questions to follow about the nature of their aspirations.

Life Grid (see appendix 7 and figure 8).

Explain that the aim of the life grid is to gain a sense of some of the important life events which have led to them to return to college in adulthood. Stress that the aim of the grid is to try and order events chronologically if possible, and that in the pilot study, research participants went back and forward.

Aim to complete the columns chronologically from school to present day – starting with education.

1. **Education** – Try to ascertain where they went? How old they were? And what they remember about it? Was it a good or bad experience? (e.g. did they move schools or institutions? etc.).

2. **Family** – Try to gain some background information about their family. Ask questions e.g. Who did you live with? Did you have any siblings? And note any changes as they went through the school years (e.g., parental death/divorce/migration etc).

3. **Housing** – Links with the previous column and can be used for clarification – or to note any house moves etc.

4. **Significant friendships or relationship** – Working chronologically – ask them about any key relationships or friendships that they remember from school – ask about any significant intimate partnerships or relationships – may include information about marriage, divorce, children etc.

5. **Hobbies or other out of school activities** – Ask them: Do you remember any hobbies or out of school activities that you enjoyed? Do you have any current hobbies?

6. **Parents' employment/own employment** – Ask them about the jobs their parents did from early childhood up to present, as well as their own employment.

7. **Health** – Ask them: Do you remember having any childhood illnesses which affected your education? Any current or ongoing health issues?

Interview Questions (first interview)

1. How did you find out about the course that you have chosen?

2. Can you talk to me about why you decided to come back to college? And what made you choose this course and college specifically?

3. What are your educational/work aspirations?

4. Have you experienced any barriers to coming back to college or pursuing your goals? (Clarify examples if needed e.g. health, finance, child care, work, time, relationships/family).

5. How have you overcome those barriers so that you can attend college?

6. Is there anything else that you think is relevant that you would like to share with me?

7. Have you got any other questions?

Interview questions (second interview)

Provide a printed copy of the transcript which had also been sent via email prior to the interview. Below is an outline of the questions used to conduct the second interview. They were modified according to responses given and based on the data from the transcripts of the first interview.

1. How have you been getting on since we last met?

2. At our last meeting, we discussed [*specific individual example*]. How is that going now?

3. When we last met, you explained that your aspirations were to [*specific individual example].* Is that still the case?
   - Based on response – ask them to explain in more detail: Can you explain why you have changed your mind?

4. Have you experienced any practical or personal setbacks [barriers or difficulties] that have changed or influenced your aspirations since we last spoke? (e.g., child care, work, time, family issues, progress through the course, financial). If yes, can you talk to me about that please?

5. What support have you received with those setbacks? (e.g., who, if anyone, has helped you and in what ways?).

6. What, if anything, have you gained from doing this course beyond the aspirations that you described at our first meeting?

7. *If they have not been clear about their aspirations* – ask again – what are you hoping to do when you have finished your course?

8. Is there any help you would have benefitted from on this course? If so, what?

9. Is there anything else that you think is relevant that you would like to share with me?

10. Have you got any other questions?

Appendix Six – Ethics Approval

...val Form

2015/61/TB

Name	**Rebecca Suart**
Main Supervisor	**Simon McGrath and Susan Jones**
Course of Study	**PhD**
Title of Research Project:	**Adult women learners in further and adult education**
Is this a resubmission? No	**Date statement of research ethics received by PGR Office: 15/10/15**

Research Ethics Coordinator Comments:

This study does not involve children or vulnerable adults and the applicant is following all of the University's ethical procedures carefully. I am content to give my approval.

I consider this research to be above minimum risk ☐

conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice and refer again to the School of Education's Researc

Outcome:

Approved ☒ Revise and Resubmit ☐

Signed: *Tony Bush* Name: Prof Tony Bush (Research Ethics Coordinator) Date: 26/10/15

Appendix Seven – Completed Life Grid

	Education	Family	Housing	Significant friends and relationships	Hobbies or out of school activities	Parent's employment/own employment	Health
Preschool	nursery FT mum worked FT	mum / grandma	nan's house	family grandma			Good
Primary school	whole family went there RC All family went there Church attached Mass Didn't like primary	Brother born	moved out of nan's but lived very close all live close				
Secondary school	Girls RC GCSE Stopped doing maths	Dad aged 14/15 Argue / fight		good friends throughout		"A workaholic"	
Post education	Hereward College 16-17 Apprenticeship – Racing yards – equine – grooming riding 17-18 met partner BHS Stage 2 originally up to 12 not worked since bored – vet nurse	got pregnant – 17y/o odd jobs Aged 18 – moved north First child aged 19yrs old 22 met lived with him for 2 yrs Second son 24 (9) 25 met Second husband 3rd child 27y (7) 4th child 28y (5)	lived with mum Council house age 19 kept house moved away from nan to be near mum – in the country	good network	Horse riding	19 22 worked evenings not been working since met 2nd husband	Nothing significant

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Life Grid	Kate (Rural 2)						
	Education	**Family**	**Housing**	**Significant friends and relationships**	**Hobbies or out of school activities**	**Parents' employment/own employment**	**Health**
pre school	Went to nursery full-time as mum worked full-time.	Mum/grandma.	Lived at nan's house.	Family - grandma looked after her as mum was working. Mum had her at age 16.	Horse riding.	Mum - worked at the job centre.	"Good just the odd cold".
KS1	My whole family went to the same school - RC. Church attached we went to mass." I didn't enjoy primary school".	Mum met stepdad when I was aged-9 - my stepbrother was born shortly after.	Moved out of nan's house but lived very close by.	Good friendships throughout school (primary and secondary).	Horse riding.	Brought up by nan/mum- "Mum divorced from dad who was an HGV driver/professional boxer and career criminal!"	"Good just the odd cold".
KS2	Local RC secondary school. "Naughty first few years" but "settled down" in GCSEs - got 5 GCSEs at C. No interest in Maths/IT. "Redoing maths now".	Moved out of mums to gran's during secondary school till aged-14 or 15 because "I resented mum and stepdad's relationship with my stepbrother" - "We used to argue and fight".		"Good friendships throughout school", (primary and secondary).	Horse riding.	"Mum worked in NHS hospital as a receptionist when I was aged 13-20 - then went into management". She went back into education at night school and did a PhD whilst still working which took her six years. "She's an inspiration!"	"Good just the odd cold".
Post-secondary education	College aged 16-17 to become a blacksmith. Only 3/50 on course were women. British Horse Racing training (stage 2) whilst son a baby which would enable me to teach 12 riders - 2 year diploma. Came back to college - bored - being away from friends and wanted to become a veterinary nurse.	Dad had more children - "I have a 9-year-old stepbrother and a 7-year-old stepsister".	Lived in the East of England aged 16-18. Moved up North aged 18 - lived with mum then got council house aged 19. After separated from second son's father stayed in the house. In the last few years moved away from nan to be near mum in the country, when children from second marriage were in pre-school.	Moved back up near family. First Marriage aged-19 to first son's father (lasted 6 months). Aged-22 met second son's father lived with him for 2 years then split up. Aged -26 met second husband. Had two children - one born when aged- 27 and the other aged-28.	Horse riding.	I was on an apprenticeship in racing yards - equine grooming and riding (aged 17-18). Various jobs: Worked for a delivery company aged 19-21. Aged 22-24 did labouring jobs. Aged 24-26 worked evenings in night clubs and restaurants. Not been working since met second husband.	No significant health issues.

Completed life grid (printed copy of the completed version on previous page - note that the text has been reformatted slightly)

Appendix Eight – Participants' Data Table

Interviewee pseudonym	Interviewee code	Age	Marital status	Self-identified Ethnic origin	Migrant – country of birth/residence	Caring responsibilities		Highest Education level	Level and type of programme currently studying in FE [1]	Ever enrolled on a degree programme	Previous employment
						Children	Other care [2]				
*Andrea**, **	1 Rural	34	Single	White British		1	No	3	3 SA	No	Admin
Kate	2 Rural	33	Married	White British		4	No	2	3 SA	No	Admin
Collette	1 Northern	33	Single	White British		0	Yes	3	3 HC	No	Admin/Care
*Debbie**, **	2 Northern	31	Married	White British		2	No	3	3 HC	Yes	Retail
Emma	3 Northern	27	Single	White British		0	Yes	3	3 HC	Yes	Admin
*Fazia**, **	1 Metropolitan	30	Divorced	Pakistani	√ Pakistan	1	No	2	2 B	No	Never worked
Safina	2 Metropolitan	47	Divorced	British Asian		4	No	2	2 HB	No	Catering
Jess	3 Metropolitan	34	Single	Mixed race		1	No	3	1 H	Yes	Service ind.
*Kathleen**, **	4 Metropolitan	29	Single	Irish traveller		1	No	1	1 H	No	Service ind.

[1] Course descriptor key: TA = Teaching Assistant; HC = Health Care; N=Nursing; SS=Social Sciences; H= Hairdressing; B= Beauty; HB=Hair and Beauty; BA=Business Admin; ESOL+= ESOL plus vocational taster; SA= Small animal care.

[2] Other care – Refers to the day to day care of adults. For example, supporting parents with the care of adult siblings or being directly responsible for the care of parents/grandparents.

*Reported in the MA Pilot study (Suart, 2015)

**Reported in Book chapter (Suart, 2019)

Interviewee pseudonym	Interviewee code	Age	Marital status	Self-identified Ethnic origin	Migrant – country of birth/residence	Caring responsibilities		Highest Education level	Level and type of programme currently studying in FE [1]	Ever enrolled on a degree programme	Previous employment
						Children	Other care [2]				
Chloe**	Adult 1	37	Divorced	White British		2	Yes	2	3 SS	No	Care
Amy**	Adult 2	40	Married	White British		3	No	3	3 SS	No	Childcare
Jackie	Adult 3	42	Divorced	White British		1	No	3	3 SS	No	Service ind.
Sarah	Adult 4	25	Single	White British		0	Yes	3	3 SS	No	Childcare
Tatva	City 1	38	Married	Pakistani	√ Pakistan	2	No	6	1 ESOL +B	Yes	Teaching
Ana**	City 2	29	Single	White Other	√ Poland	1	No	5	3 ESOL +BA	Yes	Admin
Hoda	City 3	29	Married	Other	√Afghanistan/Iran	0	No	3	1 ESOL +B	No	Service ind.
Jane	City 4	46	Married	White British		2	No	4	3 TA	No	Creative ind.
Michelle	City 5	31	Single	White British		3	No	6	3 TA	Yes	Retail
Precious	City 6	34	Single	Black African	√ Zimbabwe	2	No	3	3 TA	No	Care
Toni	City 7	28	Married	White British		1	No	3	3 N	No	Public sector
Nia	City 8	43	Single	Black African	√ Nigeria	3	No	4	3 N	No	Care

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