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## An illusion of choice: The lived experiences of non-traditional students

Item Type	Thesis or dissertation
Authors	Hopkinson, Sharon C.
Citation	Hopkinson. S. C. (2022). An illusion of choice: The lived experiences of non-traditional students [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Chester.
Publisher	University of Chester
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-05-12 06:46:25
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Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10034/627795">http://hdl.handle.net/10034/627795</a>

# An illusion of choice: The lived experiences of non-traditional students

Thesis submitted in accordance with requirements of the  
University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Education

By Sharon Hopkinson

September 2022

Word count: 59,744

## **Declaration**

I declare the material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

Signed: Sharon Hopkinson

Date: 28.09.2022

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my thanks to the EdD tutors at the University of Chester for their support throughout the programme. I would particularly like to thank my thesis supervisors, Dr Sally Bamber and Dr Jo Bacon for their supervision throughout the research project; their support and challenge has been invaluable to me.

I am fortunate to have been sponsored by the University of Chester throughout this Doctorate.

I am particularly grateful to the participants, Shea, Ted and Mathew, for sharing their experiences.

## **Dedication**

In memory of my mum.

To my dad, who always told me that I could.

To my husband, Ian, who has supported me throughout but will be pleased to hear no more about Bourdieu.

To Thomas, for your patience.

# **An illusion of choice: The lived experiences of non-traditional students**

**Sharon Hopkinson**

## **Abstract**

Students with a combination of A levels and BTEC qualifications make up a small but significant number of students entering higher education (HE) in England. There has been limited research into how these students make the decision to study a combination of qualifications or how they feel the combination has supported the transition to university.

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the in-depth lived experiences of three students who entered HE at the study university with a combination of A level and BTEC experiences. The study considers the agency the participants perceive they had during decision-making at 16 and 18. It also explores how assessment methods have acted as a structure limiting agency in decision-making. The study considers how the participants' combination of qualifications has supported their transition to university.

Analysis of the participants' lived experiences identifies three key themes: the impact of assessment type on the students, an exploration of the structures affecting decision-making at 16 and 18, and how post-16 qualifications affect their academic identity. These themes are embedded within the academic/vocational divide present within the English education system, where academic qualifications are given greater symbolic value, especially for entry to HE.

The study uses Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of doxa, symbolic violence and social reproduction to identify structures that impact on the participants' agency in their decision-making. It highlights the doxa of A levels as 'gold standard' in post-16 education. The study also provides supporting evidence for the continued academic/vocational divide in English post-16 education, through which symbolic violence is enacted on the participants. Symbolic violence is also identified in the government's policies on assessment, where a focus on examinations reduces the participants' agency. Indeed, recent changes in assessment in BTECs may limit future students' opportunities to enter HE through this route. The thesis argues that government policies on assessment serve to reinforce the academic/vocational dichotomy and this may lead to social reproduction rather than widening participation to HE.

## **Summary of portfolio**

This thesis has developed from the work I have undertaken during the Doctorate in Education. Below is a brief summary of the assignments undertaken as part of the Doctorate.

### **Research methodologies for professional enquiry**

This module introduced me to both theoretical perspectives of research and methodological considerations. Within this assignment, I considered my philosophical position in relation to knowledge and understanding, applied to a research project. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of BTEC students transitioning to higher education, focussing specifically on academic skills.

### **Social theory and education: Key issues and debates**

This module gave me the opportunity to explore in depth a theorist pertinent to my area of professional practice. Using Bourdieu's theories, particularly relating to institutional habitus and symbolic violence, I explored the role of the tutor in supporting FE students with HE decision-making, based on my own experiences within a college of FE and HE. I considered how, at times, advice is based on what is best for the college, rather than what is best for the student (a form of symbolic violence) in order to maximise recruitment to HE.

### **Creativity in practice**

This module explored the role of creativity in education. The assignment required both the development of a practical, creative resource and an accompanying written assignment. I developed a comic, with associated short video interviews with current students, linked to the comic by QR codes. The comic was designed as a user-friendly aide for students new to university, providing guidance and current student advice on developing academic skills for HE.

### **Cultural practices**

The module gave me the opportunity to explore the roles of Bourdieu's concepts of fields and capital in a college of further and higher education. I interviewed lecturers at a college, to explore their lived experiences of organisational culture. Bourdieu's concept of field was used to consider how the college worked to develop an HE culture, leading to a hierarchy of departments and apparent fracturing of the organisational culture.

### **Institutions, discontinuities and systems of knowledge**

Within this module I explored how study skills support was framed within the institutional context of a post-92 university. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence was used to problematise study skills support and its positioning as remedial support for non-traditional students, separate from the students' academic discipline.

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# **Chapter One: A level/BTEC combination students: An under-researched group**

## **Introduction to the study**

Combination students are an increasing, although still relatively small, and frequently unheard, proportion of the university population. This thesis increases understanding of how and why such students decide to study a combination of qualifications and how this affects their transition to HE. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), I explored how the participants' prior educational experiences, particularly in relation to assessment, affected how they made decisions about their post-16 education and how they perceived themselves as learners. Intertwined through these experiences are the tensions surrounding the perceived dichotomy of academic (A level) and vocational (BTEC) qualifications, based on traditional progression routes for each type of qualification, reinforced by government review (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016). Based on the participants' narratives, I explored how government policies, implemented by schools, could be considered as acts of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000) that can limit the government's own widening participation in HE strategy (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). The study increases understanding of how and why these students decided to study a combination of qualifications and how this affected their transition to HE. The study used a reflexive methodology as an integrated part of the process of IPA (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). By considering the research through my own professional role and through my lived experience of first in family to go to university, I provide a specific "insider's perspective" (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005, p. 22) to the participants' experiences.

Studies highlighted in this chapter and explored in the literature review (Chapter Two) indicate that there is a difference in retention and success in HE for combination students compared to A level only students. Yet whilst these mostly quantitative studies indicate that numbers of combination students are increasing (Mian, Richards & Broughton, 2016; Richards, 2016;

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS], 2015, 2016a), there is limited in-depth qualitative data on how combination students make their decisions about post-16 and post-18 education, and how their mix of qualifications support their transition to HE. Since the start of this study, a number of recently published studies, for example, Myhill and others' work (Myhill et al., 2019b; Myhill & Morris, 2019; Myhill & Venner, 2019) have considered how A level, BTEC and combination students find the academic transition to university. This study complements Myhill and others' recent work by exploring individual combination students' experiences in greater depth. This research has therefore given voice to three combination students and considered how their prior educational experiences moulded their decision-making and their HE experiences.

This chapter introduces the professional and wider context of the study, and briefly explores some of the key literature on the topic of students entering HE with a mix of A levels and BTEC qualifications. I highlight the significance of the research study both within the context of the university within which the research is situated, but also within the wider literature around widening participation (WP) in HE and supporting transition to HE. The chapter ends with an overview of the structure of the thesis. Data for this study were gathered before Covid-19. Therefore, the participants' experiences reflect pre-pandemic teaching, learning and assessment methods both in school/college and in university.

### **Context of the field of study**

Successive government policies in the United Kingdom (UK) have been to widen participation in HE, with Tony Blair's New Labour government promising to meet the target of 50% of young people progressing to HE by 2010 (Blair, 2001).

WP is defined as increasing access to HE for people who are traditionally under-represented (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2011b) through reducing differentials in participation rates (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). WP is not a recent policy but one that has been continued by successive governments looking to increase the flexibility of the workforce

and to encourage social mobility (Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, 2012). The political narrative underlying the policy is that individuals should seek to maximise educational opportunities, thus focusing the responsibility for social mobility on those individuals (Hayward, Katartzi, Ertl & Hoelscher, 2021). Government and Higher Education Institute (HEI) policies within this narrative often seek to 'raise aspirations' of potential students to HE, thus assuming that it is lack of aspiration that holds such students back (Webb et al., 2017). To increase entry to HE, and broaden the demographic population attending it, in the mid-1980s the Conservative Government's White Paper (Department for Education and Science [DES], 1987) encouraged HEIs to widen the range of qualifications accepted for entry to a degree. The White Paper acknowledged that this would lead to changes within HEIs: "Not only will entry requirements and procedures have to be changed; institutions of higher education will have to adapt their teaching methods and the design of their courses to accommodate new types of student" (DES, 1987, para. 2.15). More than 30 years later, WP policies are still being used to increase entry to HE of non-traditional students, although many projects focus primarily on A level students (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). The continued use of WP policies suggests that they, thus far at least, have had limited success in reducing application, acceptance and success differentials between traditional and non-traditional students, particularly in highly selective universities (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016).

Many of the students entering HE now are deemed as 'non-traditional'. However, as Chung, Turnbull and Chur-Hansen (2014) identify, the term 'non-traditional' is used inconsistently, to include a wide range of students, depending on the context of the discussion. 'Traditional' HE students were classified by Bathmaker (2003) as young, full-time students, predominantly male and middle-class. However, 'non-traditional' students now outnumber those from that traditional definition. For example, since 2016, female students have outnumbered male students in first degrees (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2023). The majority (64%) of first year students now are also over the age of 20, and 27% of students are of an ethnicity

other than white (HESA, 2023). Furthermore, 15% of first year undergraduate students come from a neighbourhood classified as having low participation in HE (HESA, 2023). It can therefore be seen that traditional students, following the definition of Bathmaker (2003), are in a minority.

In contrast, then, non-traditional students consist of a varied group, including mature students, first generation students, those with a low socio-economic status, students from ethnic minority backgrounds, and also those who arrived at university with qualifications other than A levels. Indeed, Chung et al. (2014) identified 13 categories in their systematic review of use of the term 'non-traditional student'. Government policy since 2010 has been to increase the number of non-traditional students (defined by them as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or from some minority ethnic groups) entering HE, with the desire to provide equal access to HE and to success in HE, and to increase social mobility (BIS, 2011a, 2016; Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018).

HEIs can use many different means to encourage greater participation by these non-traditional students, in order to meet government targets, as outlined in their Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and subsequently Office for Students, access agreements (Office for Students [OfS], 2019a). Access agreements are agreements by an HEI to support disadvantaged students through a range of means, which might include targeted bursaries and increased support services. OFFA (2018) noted that there was a 73% increase in the number of 18-year-olds entering university from the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods between 2006 and 2016. Whilst such students may enter HE with the traditional entry qualifications of A levels, an increasing number apply for and enter HE with a range of non-traditional qualifications (UCAS, 2018), such as BTECs.

The use of BTECs as a means of entering HE is one strategy for engaging under-represented groups which has increased participation in HE of students from neighbourhoods with the lowest levels of participation (UCAS, 2015). Rouncefield-Swales (2014) and Richards (2016) note the characteristics that are more likely to predict studying vocational qualifications (primarily BTECs); these include being male, living in the most

deprived neighbourhoods, and not achieving five A\*-C grades at GCSE. Gicheva and Petrie (2018) found that vocational qualifications are a key means of meeting the Government goal of increasing the percentage of students from minority ethnic groups entering HE by 20% by 2020, from 2009 figures. Rouncefield-Swales (2014) also identifies significant differences in the presence of BTEC students in different university types, despite overall student numbers being relatively evenly split between the different groups. For example, 39% of students attending University Alliance universities (a group of professional and technical universities) have a BTEC qualification; however, just 1.3% of students attending Russell Group members (a group of research-intensive universities) enter solely with BTEC qualifications (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). This is significant because research shows that graduates of selective universities such as members of the Russell Group have greater labour market success rates than those who graduate from less selective universities (Britton, Drayton & van der Erve, 2021).

One means of non-traditional students increasing access to a wider range of HEIs might be to study both academic and vocational qualifications.

According to Richards (2016) "The fastest growing route of all is among students studying a combination of A level and BTEC" (p. 6). UCAS (2016a) argue that this increase is due to university demands for evidence of subject knowledge and concerns over lack of examination experience, both in relation to BTEC students. Students may, therefore, be responding to pressure from universities for 'more academic' qualifications.

A mixture of BTEC and A levels may also appeal to students as it appears to keep options open (UCAS, 2016a). There has been a considerable increase in the number of students taking a combination of both A levels and vocational qualifications (hereafter described as 'combination students'), from 3% in 2006 to 17% in 2015 (Richards, 2016), although this is a measure of all students taking a combination at 16, and not a measure of those entering HE at 18 with a combination. Students studying either BTEC alone or in combination with A levels are more likely to go into HE from lower POLAR quintiles (Mian et al., 2016). POLAR is a measure of participation of 18-year-olds in local areas across the UK (OfS, 2018). As such, it is not a

comprehensive measure of either total participation in HE nor an accurate measure of individuals' social circumstances; rather it is a heuristic device to provide some indication of participation in HE according to local area classifications, with POLAR quintile five showing the highest participation rates in HE, and POLAR quintile one the lowest participation rates (OfS, 2020a). In the study university the percentage of students entering with a combination of A levels and BTEC qualifications is 9.4% (2019 intake). Overall, the most recent figures indicate that 7.9% of 18-year-old students entering HE in 2020 had a combination of A levels and BTEC (UCAS, 2020). The study university therefore accepts a slightly higher percentage of combination students than average.

However, although combination students are increasing in number, retention (remaining on the course until the end of the programme) and degree outcome are not as high as for straight A level students. Al Meselmani et al.'s (2018) figures for degree outcome indicate that combination students have a higher rate of 'good' degree outcome than BTEC only students but that the figure is consistently higher for students with just A levels. Whilst some differences in achievement can be explained by these traditional students having greater familial understanding of HE and its academic expectations, there may be other reasons for the difference between the retention and success of A level, combination and BTEC only students. One area worthy of exploration is how post-16 qualifications prepare the student for study in HE. Studies have identified the strong links between A level curricula and HE courses, particularly among the traditional, academic, HE subjects (Higton et al., 2012; Tate & Swords, 2013) which can aid in transition to HE. However, this may be at the expense of academic skills development. Jones (2011) and Fee, Greenan and Wall (2009) argue that academic skills are inadequately addressed by A level teaching and assessment, being predominantly assessed by end of course examination (Ofqual, 2018b, 2019). There are, then, a number of reasons for the differences in achievement of combination students compared to A level only students.

In contrast, BTEC qualifications are assessed through a wider range of methods (Torrance, 2017), although recent government pressure has led to

the introduction of external assessment, mostly external examination (Pearson, n.d.-a). The variety of means of assessing learning outcomes used in BTEC can be more in line with the range of methods used within HE, such as report writing, practical work (in laboratory-based qualifications) and assignments (Hurrell, Shawcross & Keeling, 2019). Furthermore, BTEC students have a positive opinion of how they have developed some key academic skills such as working independently and academic writing (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). However, there are those who argue that the limited use of examinations may affect student achievement in HE (Kelly, 2017; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). Those students who have experienced both A levels and BTEC qualifications prior to entry to HE could therefore benefit both from experience of examinations and from the more assignment-based, independent learning of BTEC qualifications.

### **Overview of current knowledge on combination students**

Whilst there has been a significant increase in combination students over recent years (Mian et al., 2016; UCAS, 2015), research has tended to focus on the larger numbers of students taking just BTEC qualifications. However, with nearly 10% of students entering the study university with a combination of BTEC and A level, this is a significant minority.

There has been some quantitative research on retention and success of combination students over recent years (for example, Al Meselmani et al., 2018). There has been limited qualitative research. Recently, Myhill and others' work (Myhill et al., 2019b; Myhill & Morris, 2019; Myhill & Venner, 2019) has explored student voices around the transition to university, using interviews and focus groups with university students. The work considers the experiences of three groups of students in HE: those entering with academic qualifications (A levels or international baccalaureate) only, vocational qualifications only, and those with a combination of academic and vocational. Myhill et al.'s studies recognise that this is an under-explored area. The studies articulate the students' experiences around transition to HE, including how they find assessment methods in HE, compared to their previous assessment experiences. Myhill and Venner's (2019) study identifies the complexities of transition for all groups of students, with little clear-cut

evidence of barriers specific to combination students. One key aspect of the work is the importance of the HEI acknowledging the differing starting points of students, and supporting the diversity of pre-university educational experiences. Myhill and Morris' (2019) study focuses specifically on differences in experiences of assessment in the same student groups. Their conclusions recommend that HEIs use a range of methods of assessment, to best support the spectrum of students' assessment experiences on entry to HE.

The studies outlined above primarily explore how students, including combination students, find the academic transition to university. My own research study has evolved over time from an initial primary interest similar to Myhill and Morris (2019); that is, how combination students perceived that their prior educational experiences aided academic transition to the study university. However, the participants' own stories, interpreted through IPA, informed the evolution of the focus from successful transition to HE (although this remains of importance) to how experiences within school impacted on and informed decision-making and identity. The participants themselves, in their narratives, identified a gap in the literature: an in-depth idiographic exploration of how combination students came to enter HE with a combination of A level and BTEC qualifications and the factors that affected their journey to and partially through HE.

By its very nature, IPA, the methodology used within this study, is idiographic, foregrounding individuals' experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Shared themes, however, are identified through the data (Smith et al., 2009). The unique experiences cannot be extrapolated to the wider population of combination students. Nevertheless, the use of rich data may allow individuals and groups to determine congruency with their own experiences. The theories applied to the participants' experiences, such as Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, may resonate, and encourage the reader to reflect on their own experiences and practices. As Smith et al. (2009) state, IPA studies can be theoretically generalisable, allowing the reader to "assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge" (p. 4).

## **Lived experience of combination students: The research questions**

The research questions derive from the overall aim of the research; that is, to explore the lived experiences of combination students as they reflect on their decision-making around post-16 and post-18 qualifications, and the transition to university.

The questions are:

1. *How do the participants experience agency in their post-16 and post-18 educational decision-making?*
2. *How do participants feel that assessment methods have affected their post-16 and post-18 educational decision-making?*
3. *How have participants' experiences of studying a combination of BTEC and A levels supported their academic transition to university?*

### **Overview of the thesis structure**

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two critically explores the literature surrounding the thesis topics. Firstly, I introduce Bourdieu's theoretical concepts that underpin the study. I then consider the literature surrounding decision-making post-16 and post-18, and the many factors that affect those decisions. I then explore the tensions between academic (A level) and vocational (BTEC) qualifications, and how they affect transition to and through university. Finally, I consider how methods used for assessment can impact on students, and whether the literature around combination students, with their experience of both academic and vocational assessment methods, identifies specific strengths in their approaches to assessment.

In Chapter Three, I introduce the methodology used within the study: IPA. I identify how my own assumptions act as a foundation for the research methodology and how the methodology was chosen to complement the research questions, on how the participants perceive their lived experiences. Furthermore, in this chapter I outline the stages of data collection and analysis. As IPA is interpretative, I identify my own role within the analysis. Chapter Four introduces the three participants and draws out the idiographic themes identified within each participant's narrative. The narratives are supported by extracts from the data, to allow the reader to immerse themselves in the lived experiences of Shea, Ted and Mathew.

Chapter Five takes the emergent themes from the participants and relates them to the wider literature surrounding the academic/vocational divide, the importance and impact of assessment on the participants, their decision-making processes and their academic identities. As Pietkiewicz and Smith

(2014) write, IPA studies typically follow the participants' narratives with a discussion relating the themes drawn from the participants with wider literature. Within this discussion chapter I draw on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence to consider common experiences such as assessment and school support for decision-making, to argue that the systems that the participants discuss are set to reproduce social structure rather than increase social mobility. Chapter Six reviews the key findings of the study; I return to reflect on my role within the research and the impact that the research has had on my professional role. I also identify the key implications of the research.

## **Chapter Two: Introducing literature on non-traditional students, post 16 qualifications and transition to HE**

Chapter One introduced the key theme of this thesis, that the number of students entering HE with a combination of BTEC and A levels is increasing. Whilst the number of students with a combination of A level and BTEC is low, it is not insignificant, with figures of around 8% (UCAS, 2020) to 10% (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018) of students entering HE holding such a combination. Following on from the ideas introduced in Chapter One, this chapter will explore the literature surrounding A level, BTEC and combination students' transitions to post-16 and post-18 education. The sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu will be introduced, as a means of considering how agency (or lack of agency) can affect factors such as academic decision-making, an important aspect of the current study. Particularly pertinent to this study is Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, which can be used to explore differential access to and transition through HE by combination students. Because there has been little research specifically on combination students, the review also explores studies in closely related topics, such as those exploring WP, BTEC and first generation students, which often share characteristics with the demographic of students undertaking a combination of qualifications. Where studies specifically explore factors for combination students, this will be identified.

### **Using the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu to interpret the participants' lived experiences**

IPA is used in this study as a means of analysing the lived experiences of the participants in relation to academic decision-making and transition to HE. However, within this study, I use the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu to "prize open issues" (Adams, Cochrane & Dunne, 2011, p. 4) drawn from my analysis of the participants' experiences. Whilst the focus of IPA is the individual participants' experiences, Smith and Osborn (2015a) argue that it is important to identify associations between the participants' lived experiences and wider theory. I use Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1977) to explore how structures within education

have an impact on the participants' agency. Agency is the individual's ability to make decisions, whereas structure is the external agents that affect our possible decision-making (Schwandt, 2007). Bourdieu's work considers the impact of structure upon agency and so is relevant when analysing factors that the participants perceive as affecting their decision-making and academic progress. Much of Bourdieu's research, and the work of others applying his concepts, aims to identify and make visible the culturally arbitrary structures that affect agency.

Bourdieu's concepts are useful when considering the lived experiences of combination students, as they can be used to explore how structural factors, such as school influence, can "perpetuate the socioeconomic status quo" (English & Bolton, 2016, p. 27). For example, although WP policies have encouraged greater entry of non-traditional students into HE, their retention and achievement does not mirror that of traditional students, and so, to use Bourdieu's (1977) term, there appears to be social reproduction. That is, whilst WP students may now be attending university, inequalities are reproduced in other ways, such as stratification of HEIs (discussed later), leading to differences in the value of different degrees from different HEIs, what Lucas (2001) calls effectively maintained inequality. Reay (2003) argues that WP students are more frequently working class and from minority ethnic groups and that classed transition to the predominantly white, middle-classed realm of HE can have a significant cost to the WP students.

Bourdieu's key concepts were developed within a specific temporal and cultural context, based within the stratified education system of 1960s France. Bourdieu's study of the civil unrest starting with students in May 1968 (Bourdieu, 1988) identifies the changes that were occurring in HE: "the increase in pupils and the concomitant devaluation of educational qualifications" (p. 163). However, the concepts are still of relevance to combination students. For example, whilst there has been no similar revolution since the massification of HE in the UK, changes to the field of HE, and an increase in HEIs, has led to an analogous reduction in the value of a degree. Indeed, the formation of the Russell Group of elite universities in 1994 (Russell Group, n.d.) could be considered a means of more privileged

groups responding to the massification of HE by developing a new form of hierarchy within HE, rather than the binary of HE or not. Therefore, despite the temporal and cultural context of Bourdieu's initial work, his theories are relevant in the HE climate within which the participants are situated.

### **Fields of power in further and higher education**

I ask the participants to reflect on both their pre-university and university education and decision-making. These two aspects of the participants' reflections are what Bourdieu (Wacquant, 1989) calls separate fields of power. A field of power (hereafter called field) is a more-or-less autonomous social structure (Marginson, 2008), within which the occupants are stratified through the relative levels of resources, or capital, that they possess within that field (Wacquant, 1989). Pre-18 education and HE can be considered as separate fields influenced by wider fields, such as the political field of power. Webb et al. (2017) stress the importance of Bourdieu's concept of fields as an anchor for considering his other concepts. Concepts such as capital can only be considered as relational, in that it is a resource used within a field. Those with more capital within a field have greater power and maintain dominance in that field (Webb et al., 2017). The participants are situated within specific strata of the fields of pre-18 education and then of HE, based on their relative levels of capital specific to those fields. Capital, as another of Bourdieu's concepts, will be discussed shortly.

As first generation students to enter HE, the participants may have limited awareness of the relative positioning of different universities in the field of HE. Numerous sub-fields exist in HE, including elite universities, and those universities more involved in mass HE (Bathmaker, 2015). Such sub-fields arise because players within the field seek to differentiate themselves from the mass of the field (Wacquant, 1989). However, subfields are not equal in their status within a field; for example, elite (selecting) universities are more autonomous within the field of HE (Marginson, 2008), whilst those who need to actively recruit intake are more heteronomous, with more external influences, such as political factors, shaping their role (Naidoo, 2004). As a recruiting university, the case study university may therefore be more

influenced by external, political factors, such as measures of value for money for the student by which the OfS (2020b) measures quality of provision.

### **Qualifications as academic capital**

Educational qualifications such as A levels, BTECs and degrees confer capital to individuals, although the level of capital varies for different qualifications. Bourdieu (1986) defines capital as “accumulated labor” (p. 241) accumulated differentially by individuals, depending on their economic and social status. Such capital is only of use within a field, as a means of gaining relative position within that field (Wacquant, 1989). Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital may be embodied in individuals, be objectified in objects such as books and artwork, and institutionalised, such as academic qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Of most interest within this thesis is institutionalised cultural capital, particularly academic capital. The stratification of qualifications (academic or vocational) and of HEIs leads to differences in academic capital that individuals can use, for example, to gain employment and therefore economic capital (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2016; Wakeling & Savage, 2015). A levels confer greater academic capital than vocational qualifications for entry to HE; for example, BTECs are not frequently accepted for entry to the sub-field of elite HE (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014; Russell Group, 2016), but are widely accepted in post-1992 universities (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018; Evans, Rees, Taylor & Wright, 2019). For combination students, such as in this study, it may be that their mix of qualifications provides greater transferrable academic capital to HE than if entering HE with just vocational qualifications.

Education is often seen as a meritocracy – how well you do is seen to be based on your own innate ability rather than being affected by social inequalities; however, Bourdieu’s work challenges this conception (Bourdieu, 1988; Sullivan, 2002). As Reay (2004a) argues, Bourdieu’s concept of capital does away with the perceived idea that ‘natural intelligence’ is what aids educational success. Rather, the familial cultural capital, particularly capital that provides familiarity with the dominant culture and its educational processes, is what increases opportunities for educational success (Bourdieu, 1976, 1986). Parental highest qualification, a form of cultural

capital, also affects student decision-making, with students whose parents have completed HE more likely to attend HE themselves (Department for Education [DfE], 2011). For the participants, who are first in family to enter HE and come from families with a working-class background, it is not meritocracy that guides their decision-making, but rather a mix of familial capital and habitus.

The participants in this study enter HE with a mix of post-16 educational experiences – both A level and BTEC. As discussed later in this chapter, these qualifications are viewed differently, with A levels being perceived as more rigorous, “gold standard” (DfE, 2016a) qualifications. Bourdieu (1993) discusses the complex routes through education; whereas there used to be few qualifications and few routes, instead there is now “a host of routes through the system that are difficult to tell apart and you have to be very alert in order to avoid running into a siding or a dead-end, and also to avoid devalued qualifications” (p. 97). The Conservative Government’s description of many BTECs and other vocational qualifications as “low quality” (Lewis, 2021, para. 1) suggests that such qualifications are viewed as “devalued” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 97). As Watson and Widin (2015) state, “a resource is ... only recognised as capital when it holds some symbolic value within a given field” (pp. 666-667). As a resource becomes more common, it loses value, so with increased participation in HE, the qualifications become devalued, albeit in a nuanced way. For example, Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) highlights that the increase in people entering HE has led to the lowering of worth of the degree in the marketplace. Thus, graduates from what are arbitrarily defined as elite universities maintain their worth in the marketplace. Those from other universities find the value of their degree reduced and denigrated as “Mickey Mouse degrees” (Ferguson, 2020, para. 2).

### **Habitus: reinforcing social reproduction in education**

All three participants are the first generation of their family to go to university. As such, they and their families have little to no experience of HE. In contrast, going to university is a familiar tradition for many middle-class children (Reay, David & Ball, 2005); that is, it is part of a middle-class family’s habitus. Habitus is another of Bourdieu’s thinking tools that can be used to

consider structure and agency within education. Bourdieu (1993) defines habitus as "...that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions" (p. 86). The ground map for an individual's habitus is set during childhood, when we assimilate the ways of thinking and being of our family (Bodovski, 2015). Reay (2004b) stresses the importance of the embodiment of habitus; rather than just a way of thinking, habitus is also demonstrated through our bodily actions. For first in family students, such as the participants of this study, their familial habitus does not include parental experiences of HE, which can lead to them experiencing a "cultural shock" (Coombs, 2022, p. 14) on entering an environment in which they have little experience: that of HE. In contrast, middle-class students are merely reproducing their habitus.

It may appear that familial habitus limits WP students, such as the participants, in their agency. Indeed, Bourdieu (1993) states that habitus can be used as a means of considering social reproduction. Yet Bourdieu (1993) also argues that the habitus is constantly adapting in response to external influences, in what Reay, David and Ball (2001) refer to as a dynamic process. Individual agency is possible, though habitus does constrain what the individual perceives as possible and probable (Reay, 2004b). Bourdieu in discussion with Wacquant (Wacquant, 1989) argues that habitus guides decision-making and limits possible pathways rather than being solely responsible for an individual's decisions. Habitus, then, is a useful concept when considering educational decision-making in the participants, because it may limit what they consider as possible, thus limiting what they believe is the pool for their decision-making, before even starting to make decisions.

As well as the participants' own habitus affecting what they perceive of as possible in their decision-making, the culture of the school they attend can have a significant impact. A number of researchers have developed the concept of habitus beyond the impact on the individual, to explore the durable and embodied dispositions of organisations such as schools and universities. This concept of institutional habitus was discussed by Reay (1998), where she identified how institutions differ in their support for and influence on students considering HE. As Tarabini, Curran and Fondevila

(2017) argue, the institutional habitus of a school can be based on inclusion, where there is a culture of adapting processes to best support students, or on exclusion, where those who can succeed are encouraged, and those less likely to succeed are pathologised. Historically, HE has been based on an institutional habitus of exclusion. For example, Thomas (2002) argues that the HE system is biased towards what used to be the dominant social group in HE: white, middle-class males. This could mean that members from other groups are pathologized. Whilst an institutional habitus can be restructured, given time, inertia within a large institution such as a university might lead to only slow change away from the “socially and culturally biased” (Thomas, 2002, p. 431) systems of education in this environment, to be more inclusive to non-traditional students’ experiences and habituses. Habitus is therefore a useful concept to consider both an individual’s bounded decision-making in HE and also the role of educational institutions in aiding students’ transitions to university study.

### **Doxa: A levels as ‘gold standard’?**

Numerous studies have highlighted that many schools favour the academic route for ‘bright’ pupils, rather than giving students a real choice of post-16 education (Bowers-Brown, 2016; Lenon, 2018; Vidal Rodeiro & Williamson, 2019). This academic/vocational split depending on the separation of students into academic or not, can be considered as what Bourdieu (2000) defines as doxa. Doxa is an important concept in Bourdieu’s theory of practice as it refers to the arbitrary nature of social systems used to control individuals’ horizons for decision-making (Deer, 2012). Bourdieu (2000) defines doxa as accepted, unquestioned opinions within a field, which lead to social reproduction through the misrecognition of these opinions as legitimate and unquestionable.

Doxa are imposed by the dominant social groups, and reinforced by all those who follow them (Deer, 2012). For the participants, these dominant social groups would be the teachers and other educational professionals tasked with supporting the participants’ post-16 decision-making. Doxa allow the dominant players within a field to set and control arbitrary norms, in order to maintain their dominance (Deer, 2012). As Bowers-Brown (2016) argues,

dominant norms are prized. Within post-16 education, it is taken for granted that A levels are a 'better' preparation for HE than BTECs. This doxic knowledge is perpetuated by government proclamations, such as A levels being described as gold standard (DfE, 2016a) and by educators. Bourdieu argues for the questioning of these doxa, and the arbitrariness of the norms to be uncovered (Deer, 2012). In this way, the unspoken means of maintaining symbolic power, through social reproduction, and the domination wrought upon agents will be made clearer.

### **Symbolic violence in post-16 education**

A key consideration for many students entering HE is that it is usually a case of decision-making, rather than choice. Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) describe the difference as: "Where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint" (p. 89); such constraints can be considered using the theory of symbolic violence. However, symbolic violence can only be considered within the broader foundational concepts of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice.

Through the imposition of doxa, Bourdieu (2000) argues that agents are controlled; not through physical violence if they transgress the doxa, but through symbolic domination or violence. Bourdieu (2000) describes symbolic violence as a form of non-physical violence wrought upon groups that are not of the dominant (middle-class) culture, but that the violence is not recognised as such by those dominated groups. Instead, the groups consider that the systems of control are natural (Duckworth & Cochrane, 2012; Schubert, 2012). Jenkins (2002) describes symbolic violence as "the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e., culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate" (p. 104). Whilst this study discusses a small number of individuals, rather than groups or classes, such violence can be illustrated through the exploration of individuals' experiences and as representatives of specific groups, such as first in family, as well as combination students. Bourdieu (2000) stresses that the dominated submitting to the culturally arbitrary rules of the dominators is not a conscious, voluntary submission. Rather, the submission is through the acquired habitus of social groups and individuals:

“habitus is ...the dormant force, from which symbolic violence, ... derives its mysterious efficacy” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 169).

Bourdieu himself uses the concept of symbolic violence as a means of understanding control and social reproduction within education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990; Bourdieu, Passeron & de Saint Martin, 1994), where form of language recognised, behaviours and knowledge are ultimately controlled by dominant classes and by large institutions such as schools and universities. Bourdieu’s work in education identifies that what is perceived as meritocratic is rather a measure of familial capital, favouring middle classed children over the working class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990). After Bourdieu, symbolic violence in education has been explored in numerous studies, including the influence of social class on sense of locality, and educational and career aspirations (Connolly & Healy, 2004), the impact of Ofsted inspections (Smith & Gallagher, 2018), transition to HE (Robbins, 1993) and widening participation in HE (Watson & Widin, 2014). Within this study, the concept is used to consider the impact of educational institutions on the decision-making of the participants.

Of course, this is not to say that those working in education look to actively impose symbolic violence on their pupils. That educators also misrecognise their actions as supportive demonstrates “the institutionalised circle of collective misrecognition” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 153) embedded within the dominant culture. Instead, it is the pedagogic action (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) of the ruling government, imposing policies and laws, which gives pedagogic authority to schools to implement those actions, through the medium of pedagogic work (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; English & Bolton, 2016). The terms pedagogic action, authority and work were introduced by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) to identify how the dominant culture imposes its actions on the dominated, through giving authority to agents (such as schools) to impose culturally arbitrary standards (such as curriculum, assessment, and entry requirements) upon groups. Whilst individual institutions and educators may have some flexibility with how pedagogic action such as policies are enacted within their class and institution, as illustrated within this study, this agency is limited, primarily by the

accountability of educators and institutions to the performativity requirements of government (Ball, 2021), such as examination results and destination data. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that “All pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (p. 5). For classes and groups who are formed from the dominant groups, the cultural arbitrary is closely aligned to their own habitus. For those from groups where the habitus is less closely aligned to the cultural arbitrary, such as the participants, symbolic violence may be imposed.

Having briefly introduced Bourdieu’s concepts as a means to explore the participants’ lived experiences, this chapter will now consider how students decide on which qualifications to study post-GCSE and the factors that may have an impact on their decisions. The use of Bourdieu’s theories will foreground the role of social class on decision-making, and how symbolic violence may be used to manage and limit the decision-making process.

### **Post-16 qualifications**

The traditional route for entry to HE is the A level, with 60% of applicants in 2018 entering HE with solely three or more A levels (UCAS, 2018). A levels are categorised as academic qualifications (UCAS, 2016a). BTEC level three qualifications are the second most common qualification for students entering HE, although the proportion of students with BTECs varies, depending on the type of HEI and the subject taken (Vidal Rodeiro, Sutch & Zanini, 2015).

BTEC qualifications are defined as applied general qualifications (AGQs) (Meselmani et al., 2018). Vidal Rodeiro and Vitello (2020) note the inconsistency in classifying applied general qualifications such as BTECs. They identify that the government considers them applied rather than vocational, but for all measures of accountability, they are classed as vocational. Within this study, BTECs will be referred to as vocational, as this is how they are perceived in most situations.

### **Process of decision-making: An illusion of choice**

Modern neoliberal education is based on the illusion of choice. Throughout the education cycle, parents and children are encouraged to make active

choices (Exley & Ball, 2014). However, such choice is often an illusion. Reay and Lucey (2003), for example, highlight that in reality, student choice of secondary school is constrained, particularly by class and ethnicity. Similarly, choice of university is often socially constrained (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Callender & Melis, 2022). Because of such constraints, rather than using the term 'choice' to explore how participants decided upon qualifications at 16 and 18, I will use the term 'decision-making', as suggested by Wright (2005). Where other authors use the term 'choice', I will use their description as I explore the literature.

This study considers the agency participants felt they had during their decision-making. For many students, there is little evidence of active choice of academic pathway at 16, with social class being a key factor in determining educational route. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), for example, argue that "the disadvantage attached to social origin is primarily mediated by educational channelling and streaming" (p. 83). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) were discussing the French education system; however, in spite of decades of WP policies, the English system still demonstrates such channelling through social class, leading to social reproduction. The continued presence of channelling and differentials in education suggests that as yet, WP policies have not yet been successful. For example, pupils from a low socioeconomic background are less likely to study traditionally academic subjects at GCSE (Henderson, Sullivan, Anders, & Moulton, 2016) and are likely to have less favourable GCSE outcomes (Stopforth, Gayle, & Boeren, 2020). As Banerjee (2016) notes in her systematic review, there are numerous reasons as to why working-class students have lower academic achievements in mathematics and sciences than middle-class students, including poverty, lower levels of parental expectations and familial cultural capital, and also differences in expectations about their achievements. Success at GCSEs and other level two qualifications will affect educational pathways at 16, leading to streaming of students into academic or vocational courses, with BTEC level three students more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). Jin, Muriel and Sibieta (2011) found that students who achieve five or

more GCSEs at grade C or above are considerably less likely to study vocational qualifications at 16+. There may be complex reasons for this difference, but advice from the school is one aspect. Richards (2016) states that courses are not necessarily selected for what is best for the pupil but for a range of reasons. These include restrictions placed on pupil decisions by school curriculum, and adult attitudes, such as parental concerns over quality, as well as tracking by teachers of 'less able' students into vocational qualifications.

As well as socioeconomic factors, where students undertake post-16 education affects what they study. Hodgson and Spours (2013) note that many middle attainers remain at their previous school, as an easier transition to post-16 study. However, they often struggle with their first choice, A levels, and so may end up changing educational direction after one year in sixth form (Gartland & Smith, 2015; Hodgson & Spours, 2013), although staying at the school. Hodgson and Spours (2013) believe that this "line of least resistance" (p. 476) is of benefit to the school in increasing student numbers and, therefore, funding. Hutchinson (2016) argues that for many, BTEC qualifications, including in combination with A levels, are often a non-decision, where structural barriers such as institutional rules, guide students to non-academic qualifications (Gartland & Smith, 2015). These actions may lead to reproduction of the social structure, rather than giving agency to students. Whilst there is some evidence that students from lower SES backgrounds are self-selecting for vocational qualifications as they may be averse to taking educational risks (Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe & Yaish, 2007), it is clear that schools have a significant role to play in reinforcing student decisions on post-16 qualifications. Meadows and Black (2018) state that there may be bias on the part of teachers, guiding those they consider more 'academic' to A levels, and others to vocational qualifications at 16. Furthermore, at the point of entry to year 13 the school may require students to leave or change qualification if their progress is not deemed sufficient to gain good grades (Lenon, 2018). Certainly, then, those deciding to take A levels at 16 may have the agency of their decisions removed from them if the school feels that success is uncertain. Ing (2018) also uses the term 'gaming'

when curriculum decisions are made in the best interests of the school, rather than the pupil. BTEC only, or a combination of BTEC and A levels, therefore may not be the decision of the student, but of the school or college.

The gatekeeping of qualifications in this way is an example of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000) upon students. The neoliberal structure of education in England, which pressures schools to maintain or improve performance measures, may lead schools to recruit and retain students most likely to meet performance standards (Ball, 2021) rather than supporting the student in making the best decision for them. Certainly post-16, then, choice for students can be limited or even non-existent.

### **BTEC as second chance**

Whilst A levels are viewed as a positive decision, this is not always so for BTECs and combinations of qualifications. Bathmaker (2013) recognises that vocational education is “regularly positioned as a second chance, and often second choice” (p. 89) to academic education such as A levels. Aspinall et al. (2017) found that students tended to make the decision to study BTECs as their academic achievements at GCSE were lower than had been hoped for. Lower achievements may be due to assessment methods; for example, Hutchinson (2016) found that students undertaking BTEC qualifications frequently did so because of failure in examination-based assessments. Rouncefield-Swales (2014) notes that students may move from A levels to vocational qualifications either early in the course or at the end of year 12 due to poor academic results or in preference of exploring one topic in greater detail rather than studying three separate topics. The students often discussed BTEC initially as an active decision in year 13, but Hutchinson (2016) found that students often later disclosed that BTECs were taken at that time due to poor AS results, often because of examinations, and as a means of gaining more UCAS points for entry to HE. BTECs (or a combination of BTEC and A level) may therefore be a pragmatic decision by the student in order to remain in school and to keep open the opportunity to attend HE.

However, a mix of academic and vocational qualifications is not open to all. Shields and Masardo's (2015) study indicates that more students may have made the decision to study a mix of vocational and academic qualifications, in order to maximise UCAS entry points, if their school had provided guidance on vocational qualifications, rather than just on A levels. However, Vidal Rodeiro and Williamson (2019) argue that "...the perception of vocational pathways as being 'low status' can deter higher attaining students" (p. 3), which may limit the numbers of students choosing to take a mix of vocational and academic qualifications. As Bourdieu (1988) argues, the value of qualifications in the eyes of society vary; valuable qualifications (such as A levels) are subject to gatekeeping, whilst "some devalued diplomas keep a certain symbolic value in the eyes of the least well provided" (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 163-164).

Despite the increase in the number of students taking a combination of A level and BTEC, there remains the structural reinforcement of the dichotomy of academic or vocational study. The Sainsbury report (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016) reinforces this dichotomy, and argues that the vocational route should be "clearly delineated from the academic option" (p. 9) as vocational qualifications should be primarily for entry to employment. Such a reinforcement may reduce students' opportunity to combine qualifications. With government policy appearing to reinforce the traditional separation of academic and vocational education, there is a perception that "young people should be making a binary choice between going down the academic or vocational 'route'" (Richards, 2016, p. 14). Richards (2016) believes that these pressures can lead to students not choosing what could be a mix of qualifications to best suit them as individuals, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, data based on the National Pupil Database indicates that at least one level three vocational qualification was taken by approximately 41% of level three students (Vidal Rodeiro & Vitello, 2020). It may well be, then, that as Richards (2016) argues, there is beginning to be a breakdown in the binary division between vocational and academic qualifications. Increasing numbers of students are eroding the academic and vocational dichotomy through entering HE with a

combination of qualifications, particularly a combination of A levels and BTEC qualifications.

Despite the increase in students taking a combination of qualifications, there is still disparity in how the two types of qualification are viewed. The Wolf (2011) report into vocational education led to changes in vocational and applied general qualifications which were supposed to provide parity of esteem with academic qualifications. However, the rhetoric around A levels being the gold standard for entry to HE (DfE, 2016a) suggests that in the UK vocational qualifications are viewed as lesser, due to the applied nature of the qualification and also the “under-developed and fractious” (Billett, 2020, p. 166) nature of the ever-changing vocational qualification landscape.

According to Billett (2014), this distinction and the hierarchy of academic over vocational qualifications is maintained by “privileged others” (p. 2), through implementation of government policies on education. It is then supported by institutions such as universities. Those taking A levels are more likely to go to more prestigious HEIs, in spite of government rhetoric around equivalency of qualifications and parity of esteem (Hoelscher, Hayward, Ertl & Dunbar-Goddet, 2008). As James Relly (2021) argues, “it is impossible to have parity of esteem when one route has no esteem in the eyes of parents and students” (p. 517), and also, one can add, in the eyes of HEIs (Ofqual, 2019). Instead, vocational students “are funnelled into post-92 HEIs” (Hoelscher et al., 2008, p. 149), which may limit their future returns within employment.

The lack of parity of esteem of qualification is transferred to the students taking those qualifications. For example, Al Meselmani et al. (2018) note that vocational students are generally seen as deficient. It is interesting to note the perceptions of academics in one study where BTEC students were questioned about the transition process. The academic noted “... I believe that all felt grateful to have been accepted” (Aspinall et al., 2017, p. 25). This statement suggests that BTEC students are tolerated and should consider themselves lucky to be accepted into a Russell Group member university. It appears that students may internalise this expectation of gratitude, with Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) finding that some WP students discuss the “honour and ... privilege” (p. 610) of attending university. Such

internalisation of gratitude is an indication of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence being enacted within the educational system. Here, there is the suggestion that BTEC students have been permitted entry into the Russell Group university as an exception, rather than a right.

Both popular opinion and policy do much to reinforce a dualism that ought not to exist, both between academic and vocational as ways of entering HE, and between the use of a 'gold standard' qualification compared to what is viewed as a lesser qualification. However, Richards' (2016) work does suggest that some headteachers are breaking down the perceived dualisms by encouraging combinations of qualifications, to best fit the student rather than reinforcing the academic/vocational divide. Hence, how students perceive that they make decisions about undertaking a combination of qualifications to enter HE is an important area for research. How such students decide on HE institution and course is also an area that has been little studied.

### **Making decisions about university**

Whilst this thesis considers the transition of students to and, partly, through university, it must be recognised that not all students taking qualifications at 18 then go on to university. The New Labour government's desire for 50% of young people to progress to some form of HE was met in 2017/18 (Coughlin, 2019), leaving around 50% not entering HE. Whilst reasons may be varied, the role of habitus of families of lower SES may lead to self-exclusion from applying for HE (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) state, those who eliminate themselves from education at points such as the point of application to university have "an intuitive grasp of their poor class chances" (p. 162); that intuition might be considered the individual's habitus. Such individuals are not part of this study, but their existence should be acknowledged. Using Richards' (2016) figures of 17% of students aged 16-18 taking a combination of A level and BTEC, and 8-10% of such students entering university (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018; Universities UK, 2018), only around 47-59% of combination students enter HE directly after school or college. That many students taking such a combination come from lower

SES backgrounds may be one factor affecting their decision whether to enter HE or not.

A key facet of successive governments' aims of having 50% of young people entering HE was to widen participation in HE. They aimed to achieve this by increasing the numbers of applications from groups that have traditionally been less likely to enter HE, until the DfE and Williamson's recent (2020) speech removing the aim, to focus instead on increases in apprenticeships. WP in UK HE had been a government focus for many years, and concern was shown when it was first attempted in the 1960s (Maton, 2005). Even during these first attempts, there was problematisation of the WP student, with Sloman (as cited in Maton, 2005) concerned that working class boys coming to university came "from homes with no tradition of culture or learning" (p. 692). Little has changed in how WP is viewed; in 2002, the then Chief Executive of the Council for Higher Education was concerned about letting in "the unwashed" (Tysome, 2002, para. 7), whose social skills were not good enough for more elite universities: "These skills are often bred into you if you come from a certain social class, but they are not if you were born on the wrong side of the tracks" (Tysome, 2002, para. 8). Such a viewpoint illustrates the implicit (here made explicit) role of habitus in guiding the way we move through the world (Bourdieu, 1993). It also illustrates the contempt with which WP students, including combination students, may be viewed.

Whilst there are still schemes aiming to increase participation in HE, particularly for students from a WP background, there is now another issue with WP: where students go to university. Wheelahan (2015) believes social inequality is, in modern society, not so much about access to education but the type of education that they can realistically access. Wheelahan (2015) was discussing the academic/vocational divide in Australian education, with those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being more likely to be categorised as 'weaker' students and so undertake vocational qualifications. However, her argument about social inclusion/social justice can also be applied to UK education, including HE. Wheelahan argues that increasing access to education is inclusion, but that social justice can only be achieved if mechanisms are in place to acknowledge and make amendments

for the impact of social and economic disadvantage. For example, in spite of massification of HE to increase participation, Boliver (2011) notes that social inequalities in UK HE mean that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are still less likely to go to university than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and when they do go to university, they are less likely to go to prestigious HEIs.

A key consideration for many students entering HE is that it is usually a case of decision-making, rather than choice. Thus, students make their decisions on HE based on what appears possible to them rather than considering all possibilities, what Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) call “horizons for action” (p. 34). These are the possible actions and decisions that an individual can realistically make, based on their prior experiences and upbringing. For many middle-class students, going to university is not a decision that needs to be considered. Rather, it is where they go to university that forms the main decision (Hoskins, 2017), reproducing the actions of previous generations. Christie (2009) states that “middle-class discourses about the value of higher education have become pervasive and now define the expectations of young people from across the class spectrum” (p. 127). In contrast, O’Shea (2015) argues that first in family students are making active decisions to enter HE. As Reay, Davies, David and Ball (2001) state, “Individuals applying to do higher education courses are making very different kinds of choices within very different circumstances and constraints” (p. 860). This study will give voice to how the participants made their own decisions.

Where a student attends university can be significant due to the stratification of the HE field in the UK. Stratification in educational systems can be defined as vertical differentiation between different players within the education field (Thompson, 2019). That there is stratification of the UK HE field seems in little doubt. Numerous authors have discussed the varying statuses of different HEIs within the field of HE (Boliver, 2015; Hayton, 2018; McCaig, 2015; Raffe & Croxford, 2013), with research intensive elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge in the top strata, and many newer universities (the ‘post-92’ universities) lower in the hierarchy (Boliver, 2015). Those who are first in family to go to university (often WP students studying BTECS or a

combination) are less likely to enter research-intensive universities, and more likely to go to post-92 universities (Henderson, Shure & Adamecz-Völgyi, 2020) such as the case study university. HEIs are measured on factors such as perceived measures of quality, academic selectivity and research activity (McCaig, 2015). Boliver (2015) would add that the more implicit factor of socioeconomic mix of students is also of importance in how universities are perceived. She argues that whilst this is not an explicit classification, it nevertheless “undoubtedly contributes to different estimations of university prestige” (p. 614). As Bourdieu (1988) argues, the increase in the number of students participating in HE, and the associated changes in social composition of the student body in a university, differs depending on the position of the institution within the hierarchy. McCaig (2015) suggests that this form of vertical differentiation ensures the autonomy of elite universities. It may also support social reproduction and reduce social mobility.

Stratification of HE should be a concern to HE policy makers and government, if increases in HE participation are framed as a means of increasing social mobility. This is because students from WP backgrounds, many of whom have non-traditional qualifications or a combination, are primarily found in post-1992 HEIs, rather than elite and Russell Group universities (Banerjee, 2019; Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018; Evans et al., 2019). As Thompson (2019) argues, there has been the expectation that government policies to increase participation in HE would lead to greater equality in participation for those groups that traditionally had lower participation rates. Whilst there has been an increase in numbers of lower participation groups attending, there is still inequity in where such students attend HE. Wolf (2020) proposes that governments see an increase in students being first in family to attend university as evidence of a meritocracy. However, because of the stratification of UK HE, the relative benefits of class structure remain (Wolf, 2020). Boliver et al. (2022) argue that the current method of access to HE through procedural meritocratic selection takes little account of the impact of social and economic inequalities that affect disadvantaged students. As Bourdieu (1988) argues, it is the institutions that are lower in the hierarchy that “serve as a refuge for students

who... would have been excluded” (p. 165), and those students have more limited social and employment benefits from their degrees (Wakeling & Savage, 2015).

Although not yet studied in combination students, many students undertaking vocational qualifications only start thinking about HE after starting post-16 education. UCAS (2016b) found that those students who started to think about going to university whilst in primary school were more likely to attend higher tariff universities. Whilst UCAS (2016b) do not explore the reasons behind this, those from homes with a higher SES are more likely to have parents who have themselves gone to university, thus normalising the experience; university is part of their familial habitus (Anders & Micklewright, 2015). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) use the word epiphany to describe how some students, with the support of college tutors, realise that they are capable of attending a selecting university. However, it is harder for BTEC students to determine entry requirements for a university course than it is for A level students (UCAS, 2016a). Green and Vignoles (2012) state that whilst many admissions departments rely on official scales of equivalence for less common entrance qualifications (the UCAS tariff), personal and institutional judgements are also made. Even before applications, BTEC students may struggle to find information on whether and where their qualifications are accepted for entry to HE. UCAS (2016a) identify that there is a lack of clarity in university admissions information about entry requirements for applied general qualifications. It may also be unclear what routes are available for students with such qualifications (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018); that is, how their level three qualifications articulate with HE courses, thus hindering progression. Such structural and cultural barriers make the route to HE unclear for WP students with vocational qualifications. The inclusion of at least one A level in their suite of qualifications may make such a route clearer.

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital has a role to play in considering how the participants make decisions about HE. Bradley et al. (2013) highlight that applying to and getting into university involves students’ families, but in classed ways. They argue that middle class families can provide cultural,

social and economic capital to support decision-making. Daly and Thomas (2008) found that nearly 60% of participants in their study used advice from parents and other family members in helping the decision-making process. In contrast to the concerns of middle-class parents, Bok (2010) argues that there can be a perception that working class parents do not care about their children's education. However, rather than lack of interest, it is lack of familiarity with educational options, or as Bourdieu (1986) would argue, lack of cultural capital, that can prevent parents from actively supporting their children (Bok, 2010). The families of working-class children who are first in family to enter HE may only be able to provide emotional support and encouragement (Bradley et al., 2013; Connor et al., 2001; Hoskins, 2017). Furthermore, Reay's (1998) work highlights that families of working-class students show less understanding of the intricacies of UCAS applications and of the relative statuses of different HEIs. A lack of cultural capital in relation to knowledge around HE can therefore impact on students' potential pool for decision-making. Decision-making is therefore a classed concept in relation to university.

Another source of advice for decision-making about HE is school or college. Daly and Thomas (2008) specify, in particular, teachers who have had recent experience of HE themselves are often considered as sources of advice. Rouncefield-Swales (2014) states that for WP students, course tutors provide a greater influence on HE decision-making than for non-WP students. Oliver and Kettley (2010) argue that teacher perceptions of HEIs can be a significant influence on pupils' HE decision-making, either as facilitators of applications to elite HEIs or as gatekeepers, discouraging such applications. Whilst the discouragement comes from concern for the students not fitting into such universities, in reality, the tutors may be limiting student aspirations through the tutors' own beliefs about the institutions and their own habitus (Oliver & Kettley, 2010). As Bourdieu (1977) states, different social groups, embedded within different habituses, have "different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable" (p. 78). What the students and tutors perceive as support could, instead, be considered a form of symbolic violence, by encouraging students with little cultural capital to consider only

what is probable. That is, the support encourages students to apply for lower status HEIs, thus maintaining social reproduction.

Rhetoric around the importance of student choice in HEI in guiding marketisation of HE was introduced in the 1997 Dearing Report (Callender & Dougherty, 2018). It was reinforced by the 2004 Higher Education Act (DfES, 2003) and the Browne Report (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010), which recommended that funding more closely followed individual student choice. BIS (2016) took the rhetoric around choice further through framing HE decision-making as a choice based on course quality and value for money after the introduction of tuition fee loans. Furthermore, the White Paper '*Success as a knowledge economy*' (BIS, 2016) stresses the role of the student in making decisions using information such as teaching excellence, as measured by the Teaching Excellence Framework, in order to make an informed choice. Government policy, therefore, assumes a rational decision-making process for students looking to enter HE, with decisions based on teaching quality and value for money. However, it is not at all clear that students do use such a rational process to make such decisions.

Rational action theory (RAT) states that a "rational tendency" (Goldthorpe, 1998, p. 169) will be found within the majority of actors in a population. The rational decision-making process involves agents considering costs of education, likelihood of success and potential benefits of the route (Thompson, 2016). Participants should seek to maximise potential returns within the stratified UK HE system by applying for the most prestigious HEI possible, subject to predicted grades. Whilst Goldthorpe (1998) stresses that individuals do not act rationally at all times, from a group population viewpoint there should be overall rationality. However, not all student groups appear to act rationally, to maximise their possible returns by rational decision-making. For example, Hoelscher et al. (2008) identify that students with vocational qualifications primarily enter post-92 HEIs; they suggest that such students act with "bounded rationality" (p. 143), with location being of most importance in decision-making. Such population-based examples of decision-making do not follow Goldthorpe's (1998) argument for overall rationality. Furthermore,

Bourdieu (2000) argues against the role of RAT as a means of individual decision-making; rather, decisions are informed and imbued by the individual's habitus. The habitus is "inscribed in their bodies by past experiences" (p. 138), and decisions are made based on what the individual sees as probable based on their prior experiences, rather than what might be possible. RAT, then, despite its embedding within the political rhetoric of student choice, may only go part way to explaining how students, such as the participants, make decisions about HE.

One aspect of decision-making that can be based on more or less rational decisions is the use of knowledge of others. Ball and Vincent (1998) introduce the concepts of hot and cold knowledge in decision-making in education. Although they were concerned with choice of secondary school, the concepts have also been used in HE decision-making (Slack, Mangan, Hughes & Davies, 2014). Hot knowledge is defined as knowledge gained from acquaintances on the grapevine (Ball & Vincent, 1998), whereas cold knowledge is that provided by institutions. Slack et al.'s (2014) work identifies that hot knowledge is more important to those students with less experience of HE, such as first-generation students. However, such students are likely to have access to fewer sources of hot knowledge than students from middle class environments (Davies, Slack, Hughes, Mangan, & Vigurs, 2008).

Decision-making about HE, then, is again a classed process. Students from middle-class families can draw on cultural, economic and social capital to make decisions on where is best to study. Students from working class families, often first in their family to apply for HE, can often only rely on emotional support from family. There is also tracking of non-traditional students, particularly those with vocational qualifications, into less prestigious universities. Even finding out what qualifications are accepted by HEIs can be complex for those students with a mix of qualifications. Nevertheless, students may apply, but their acceptance is not guaranteed, and is affected by their prior qualification types.

## **Being accepted onto an HE course**

Different qualifications taken at 16+ can affect opportunities for study in HE. As Vidal Rodeiro and Williamson (2019) found, those studying A levels are more likely to be retained in education, primarily in HE. However, not all applications to university result in an acceptance by the university, and different qualifications appear to have differences in acceptance rate. For example, acceptance onto HE with a BTEC (83%) is slightly lower than for those with A levels at 89% (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018; UCAS, 2015), with combination students having an intermediate acceptance rate of 86% (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018). Nevertheless, acceptance rates for BTEC students have increased over recent years, from less than 80% in 2008 (Mian et al., 2016). The authors suggest that the increase in acceptance rates may be because of the increase in students with higher GCSE attainment (those with at least 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE) taking vocational qualifications at Key Stage 5 (Mian et al., 2016). Therefore, whilst post-16 qualification decisions have an effect on acceptance to HE, the gap between A level students and those with other qualifications (including combination students) is decreasing.

As well as a difference in acceptance rates, BTEC students are more likely to go to a lower tariff university (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018), and this gap is widening (UCAS, 2015). Rouncefield-Swales (2014) identifies differences in the presence of BTEC students in different university types, despite overall student numbers being relatively evenly split between the different groups. For example, 39% of students attending University Alliance universities, defined as “professional and technical universities” (University Alliance, n.d., para. 1), have a BTEC qualification; however, only 1.3% of students attending Russell Group have such a qualification (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). This may in part be due to the differences in subjects provided within the differing university groups. For example, Patrignani, Battiston, and Conlon (2019) found that students having undertaken BTECs in a specific vocational area will then continue to study that subject area in HE. It may be that more vocational HE qualifications, more clearly aligned with articulation from BTEC vocational courses, are more commonly found in post-1992 universities with a tradition of vocational HE. This may contrast with more

traditional subjects offered within Russell Group universities. Nevertheless, Russell Group (2016) appear to actively discourage BTEC students from applying to them, as a group: "...although BTECs have recently been redesigned, it is very important to know that they may not be considered suitable preparation for many Russell Group degree courses" (Russell Group, 2016, p. 18). Combination students may have greater flexibility in their applications than BTEC only students, more able to attend higher-tariff universities, with their mix of academic and vocational qualifications. However, there is currently little data on this area.

### **Achievement in HE**

Access onto a course is only part of WP. There are concerns over how well such students are retained for the length of their course and also how they achieve success in their qualifications. Recent research identifies that success and retention rates remain lower for BTEC students than for A level students (Banerjee, 2019; Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2018a). Rouncefield-Swales (2014) notes that the most common reason for leaving their university course for both groups of students was academic failure, but for BTEC students, this accounted for 17.4% of students, as opposed to 3.5% for A level students. Students who are first in family to enter HE are 4% more likely to drop out of university than those whose parents attended HE (Henderson et al., 2020), although data are not given in this study for differences in prior qualifications. When broken down into demographics, those more likely to not continue in HE are young men, certain minoritised ethnic students, particularly Black students, and disabled students (Hillman, 2021); that is, those who are also more likely to undertake BTEC qualifications. This raises questions about the inclusivity of UK HE, not only for those studying alternative qualifications to A levels. Banerjee, Myhill and Robinson (2019) argue for systemic changes in HEIs to support not just transition to university but to implement interventions to improve retention and success of BTEC students.

In addition to lower retention levels, there are differences in degree achievement. Students with BTEC level three qualifications are less likely to gain a first or upper second degree classification (defined as a good degree)

than A level students (Aspinall et al., 2017; Banerjee, 2019; Gill, 2018; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014; Shields & Masardo, 2015, 2018). For example, Shields and Masardo's (2018) study of the dataset of all students graduating between 2009 and 2013 found that 84% of A level only students gained a good degree, compared to 50.5% of BTEC only students. 60% of combination students gained such a degree classification, intermediate between A levels only and BTEC only (Al Meselmani et al., 2018; Shield & Masardo, 2015), although this did depend on the ratio of academic to vocational qualifications studied (Vidal Rodeiro & Williamson, 2019). Rather than the gap decreasing, over the time of their data the gap between degree outcomes in these three groups increased (Shields & Masardo, 2018). Gill (2018) argues that differences between qualifications in his study on achievement are relatively small when background factors are considered. Gill (2018) also notes that there is association rather than causation between post-16 qualifications and likelihood of a good degree. Causation is a complex area, especially in relation to determining the impact of prior qualifications, socioeconomic status and the impact of first in family to enter HE. Research by OfS (2019b) identifies that WP students are 10% less likely to gain a good degree classification, but these data are not broken down into prior qualification types. As Myhill et al. (2019a) state, the significant overlap between those studying BTECs and those from a WP background makes it difficult to identify the level of impact of qualification and of socioeconomic factors in this difference in success. King's College London, ARC Network and University of Manchester (2015) note the significant impact of social, cultural and economic capital on HE achievement. They suggest that lack of familial experience with HE, and lack of familial support due to this, can affect students' learning experiences.

### **Transition to HE**

Once students have successfully applied to and entered HE, there is the process of transition to the new learning environment. Transition is a term used to identify changes in life. Within education, there are a number of transition phases; key amongst these are the transition from primary to secondary schooling and from compulsory education to non-compulsory

education. The transition from school or college to university is one of considerable interest. One of the reasons for the interest in transitions from one stage of education to another is the number of factors that can affect its success. Many studies have explored the transition of students from school or college into HE (see, for example, Bowl, 2001; Gale & Parker, 2014; O' Donnell, Keam & Stevens, 2016; Reay et al., 2005). These studies have identified the multi-faceted process of transition and acknowledged the long-term process of the student becoming integrated into the university environment, or failing to do so and dropping out of HE at least temporarily, sometimes permanently. Some of the significant factors that impact on successful transition to HE include the socio-economic background of the students, gender, race, and prior education (Reay et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2005; Tett, Cree & Christie, 2017). Although each of these individual factors has a significant impact on successful transition, it must be acknowledged that transition is not one single process.

One aspect of the transition process to HE relates to the development of the academic skills required to study successfully. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term 'academic transition' to describe the process of students becoming proficient in the academic skills required for successful study in HE. Academic transition is experienced by many students when entering HE, because of differences between the forms of teaching and learning experienced within school and college and those used within a university. Many students entering HE feel academically unprepared, whether having studied A level, BTEC or a combination of both (HEFCE, 2018b). In general, studying at university is considered to involve greater levels of independent study than students from schools and colleges are typically used to (Smith & Hopkins, 2005; Wingate, 2007). Independent study can be defined as the students taking greater responsibility for their own learning, to become an autonomous learner (Wingate, 2007). Within school or college, teachers often work more closely with the students, and may remind students of key assessment dates, to encourage timely completion (Torenbeek, Jansen & Hofman, 2011). Within a university, such encouragement is rarer; students are instead expected to plan their own time

and study so that assessments are completed and submitted on time (Wingate, 2007). The change to more independent learning is therefore one aspect of academic transition to university. However, whilst Torenbeek et al. (2011) argue that the degree of fit between teaching at school and at university may affect first year achievement at university, they found that this is of less importance than, for example, student socioeconomic background.

### **Factors affecting transition to HE**

Although the number of students entering HE with BTEC qualifications, or a combination of both BTEC and A level, is increasing, students from non-traditional backgrounds (many of whom will have studied BTECs) may struggle with the transition to HE. Watson, Nind, Humphris and Borthwick (2009) found that issues faced by WP students are due in part to the unchanging culture of HEIs, where young, white, middle-class students entering with A levels have traditionally been the dominant group. Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) argue that often it is left to the student to adapt to the university, rather than the university adapting to the changing student population. However, it is important that such students are not viewed as in deficit (O'Shea, 2015). Rather, they have different skills and strengths, that could be of use to students both within university and in employment (Banerjee, 2019). As Haggis and Pouget (2002) argue, whilst institutions may problematise WP students, such students “arguably form the new majority coming into what is now a mass system” (p. 331). However, because of the apparent structural and cultural inequalities within HEIs in relation to alternative qualifications, it may be some time before the system adapts to the new majority.

What WP students, particularly those entering HE with BTEC qualifications, may find, are differences in teaching, learning and assessment. Katartzi and Hayward (2020) view transition from vocational education to HE as a move between two different pedagogical fields, with vocational students needing to adjust to studying within that new field. Osmon (2016) notes that BTEC assessments may differ from those in HE; those used in BTECs “are indicative of a directed pedagogical approach that provides extensive guidance to learners” (p. 1). It must be noted, however, that similar

comments have been made about A levels in relation to preparation for HE (Shields & Masardo, 2015; Smith & Hopkins, 2005). O'Shea, Lysaght and Tanner (2012) maintain that, to better integrate students with vocational qualifications into HE, HE providers should acknowledge the experience and knowledge that such students bring, rather than suspicion at their differing educational experiences. Hayton and Bengry-Howell's (2016) consideration of supporting the transition of WP students to HE stresses the importance of developing both subject-specific and academic skills knowledge, rather than assuming that students enter HE with similar skills in essay writing and other academic skills. This wider consideration of skills and knowledge development would support all new students in the transition to HE, rather than considering the deficit model of students with vocational qualifications, which may act as a form of symbolic violence to maintain social reproduction.

Students entering HE with vocational qualifications or combinations of qualifications appear aware of the way that they can be viewed by academic staff at university. Students in the selecting universities in Rouncefield-Swales' (2014) study expressed frustration with the lack of acknowledgement of the skills they brought from their prior qualification. Although the students showed no real consensus on the similarity or dissimilarity between BTEC teaching and learning and that experienced in HE, they did feel that the BTEC prepared them positively for time management and assignment writing (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014) due, perhaps, to the similarity between BTEC and HE in these respects. Crabtree, Roberts and Tyler (2007) argue that vocational students may be better able to work independently than A level students, as they have more opportunities for it in their courses. Similarly, students in Al Meselmani et al.'s (2018) study reflected that BTEC curriculum supported transition to HE and prepared them well for assignment writing and independent study. However, UCAS (2016a) note that if HEIs assume that BTEC students have experienced similar teaching, learning and assessment as A level students then BTEC students may struggle with examinations and gaps in subject knowledge. Rouncefield-Swales (2014) notes that lack of assessment by examination has been an issue with BTEC students entering

HE, although recent changes in the BTEC qualifications have included externally assessed examinations (Pearson, n.d.-a).

Whilst BTEC students may be cast as deficient in both their subject knowledge and academic skills, it might be thought that those who have passed the 'gold standard' qualifications of A levels are prepared for study at university. However, numerous studies have identified that A level students transitioning to HE have found the move from guided learning to independent study difficult (Shields & Masardo, 2015; Smith & Hopkins, 2005). Supporting pupils in becoming independent in their study can be at odds with a school's need to maintain its position in school performance tables. One teacher in Money, Nixon and Graham's (2019) study explains that their school reintroduced formalised timetabled independent study for their A level students after results dropped when the school did not implement the timetabled study for one year. This suggests that, certainly in this study, A level students have little opportunity to develop the truly independent study skills required on transition to university. The school, here, prioritises school performance tables over developing students' independent study skills, which could be considered a form of symbolic violence. That is, supported study is purportedly put in place to aid student learning; however, it is instead to meet the performativity needs of the school and, at the same time, limiting the development of the students in ways that can help their future education.

As well as potentially struggling with independent study, a number of studies have argued that A level students have limited experience in academic skills such as writing. Baker (2017) advises that A level students may find the transition to academic writing in HE difficult, as their writing is often guided by specific teacher feedback relating to detailed learning outcomes. Similarly, students in Tate and Swords' (2013) study felt that there was little opportunity at A level to develop the writing and referencing skills needed in HE. Jones (2011) and Fee, Greenan and Wall (2009) argue that A level students lack numerous academic skills, with such skills being inadequately addressed by A level teaching and assessment. Rather than equipping students with the academic skills for HE, it appears that A level teaching and assessment may limit their development. Jones et al. (2015) note that if students have been

taught to the test in A levels, leading to surface learning, they cannot be expected to adapt immediately to the deeper learning required in HE, an idea supported by Baer's (2008) study, where students struggled with critical rather than descriptive writing. This can lead to students becoming angry and disappointed that their A level courses had not prepared them sufficiently for the skills needed for successful study at university (Tate & Swords, 2012).

The academic transition of A level students to HE is aided by the congruence between many A level syllabi and university syllabi. For example, Higton et al.'s (2012) findings identify that HEIs often adjust first year undergraduate degree content to consider differing levels of subject knowledge amongst incoming students. HEIs are therefore willing to adjust subject content for A level students to aid transition, perhaps because of the volume of students affected; however, there is often the view that BTEC students are a problem (Burrell, 2010; Ertl, Hayward & Hoelscher, 2009), rather than considering that the HEI's ways of teaching and assessing have evolved to take account of A level students' needs, and could also be developed to take account of the changing demographic of students now entering HE with so-called 'alternative' qualifications.

There have been few studies specifically on how combination students perceive their prior qualifications have supported transition to HE, although a number of studies do report on some findings as part of larger studies on transition and BTEC students. With regard to teaching methods, Al Meselmani et al. (2018) found that combination students reported that teaching at school or college involved contact with tutors that "was daily, close and personal" (p. 45), with active learning in small groups and ongoing, formative feedback. Students reflecting on their educational experience at college or school highlighted that pre-university experiences involved 'hand-holding' and 'spoon-feeding' compared to their experiences at university. Al Meselmani et al. (2018) noted that combination students believed that A level and BTEC teaching and learning were similar in this respect. Combination students might, therefore, be at little advantage over straight A level or BTEC students in relation to the academic transition to HE. Myhill and Morris' (2019) recent study finds that students consider that a diversity of

assessment methods is beneficial, whatever their academic background, when they transition to university. For example, A level students, who may have experienced only limited methods of assessment, also feel that they benefit from assessment diversity. Combination students felt well-prepared, with a mixed skills set of both examination skills and written assessment skills (Shields & Masardo, 2015), suggesting that their wider experiences of teaching, learning and assessment has a positive impact on confidence in the transition to HE.

### **Methods of assessment and the impact of government policy**

Methods of teaching, learning and assessment in HE are varied, but assessments are frequently based on written assignments and on examinations (Gibbs, 2006) although an extensive range of assessments may be used (Brown & Knight, 1994; Higher Education Academy, n.d.). In contrast, recent policy changes to qualifications frequently used for entry into HE has led to the dominance of assessment by examination, particularly for A levels (Ofqual, 2018b, 2019).

Since 2010, both the Coalition and Conservative governments have moved towards increased end of course testing in post-14 education, in order, they suggest, to provide greater rigour (DfE, 2016a). In 2013, the then Secretary of State for Education for the coalition government, Michael Gove, stated about GCSE reform: “The qualifications should be linear, with all assessments taken at the end of the course” (p. 3), although providing no justification to such a change. Similarly, the former coalition Minister for Schools, David Laws (*Hansard*, 16 April 2013, col 52), argued for the development of linear A levels, contending that end of course assessment is a means of increasing rigour and aiding student transition to HE. There is a suggestion here that increased rigour is related to reduced involvement of teachers within the assessment process. There is little evidence to suggest that such high-stakes end-testing is the most inclusive or effective means of measuring learning. Torrance (2018), exploring teacher-based assessment in GCSEs, claims that political arguments, rather than evidence-based arguments, about the validity of teacher-based assessment (that is, coursework) are what have led to the return to end of course examinations as

substantive summative assessment. It appears that this political argument may have been subsumed into public perceptions, exacerbated by media coverage of supposed grade inflation (see, for example, Clark, 2017), leading to assumptions that examinations are more rigorous as a measure of learning. Crisp (2008) notes that the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency (QCA) appeared in favour of teacher-assessed coursework in GCSEs, but nevertheless such assessment has been overwhelmingly removed from both GCSEs and A levels. The QCA has since been superseded by the government department Ofqual, which implemented government requirements that assessments became linear rather than modular (Ingram, Elliott, Morin, Randhawa & Brown, 2018) and assessed through end of course examinations, following a “policy steer letter” from the Education Secretary, Michael Gove (Torrance, 2018, p. 16).

Within HE, there has been the realisation that coursework may better evaluate student learning (Gibbs, 2010) than examinations. This is reflected in the changing proportions of forms of assessment in UK universities over the past 40 years. Richardson’s (2015) literature review of this topic shows an increase in the proportion of assessment through coursework over this period. Richardson (2015) argues that this change in assessment methods is, at least in part, responsible for the increase in good degree results over recent years. Many universities (see, for example, Plymouth University, 2014; University of Bath, 2016) stress the importance of a diversity of methods of summative assessment being used, to be more inclusive of the increasingly diverse student population, although as Tai et al. (2022) argue, this is still imperfect, particularly for students with disabilities. Assessment methods used in A levels therefore appear to be at odds with the more varied methods of assessment used within HE itself. This may lead to students entering HE via the traditional route of A levels having limited experience of wider academic skills.

A levels are used primarily for entrance to HE (UCAS, 2014) and, as outlined above, HEIs now use a wide range of assessment techniques. Whilst UCAS do not state that A level changes to end of course testing are a negative step, they do argue that “such an approach may not assess the skills and abilities

of the entire learner cohort undertaking A levels” (UCAS, 2014, p. 5). A focus on examinations, therefore, may disadvantage those whose strengths are not in taking examinations. Rather than aiding the development of independent study skills, a number of studies have suggested that there is pressure on teachers to teach to the examination (Meadows & Black, 2018) and “spoon feeding” (Money et al., 2019, p. 8) to maximise results. Having been through a school educational system based on assessment as a means of measurement from the age of five, Medland (2016) argues that students coming into HE have a “preoccupation with learning to pass (the testing culture) rather than learning to learn (the assessment culture)” (p. 87). However, Medland (2016) also notes that this is not the fault of the student; rather, they are responding to “the dominant discourse and underlying culture of assessment” (p. 82). Therefore, whilst positioned as “gold standard” (DfE, 2016a) for entry to HE, recent changes in A levels may have reduced their effectiveness in preparing students for the skills needed for studying at a higher level.

In contrast to almost exclusive use of examinations as assessment in the most recent GCSE and A level reforms, BTEC qualifications are more frequently assessed through a range of methods. Whilst assessment of BTECs is primarily through written assignments, other forms of assessment are widely used, such as presentations and practical assessment (Pearson, n.d.-b). Torrance (2017) argues that these different forms of assessment can capture a range of learning outcomes such as practical application of knowledge, instead of limiting them to those that can be assessed by examination. Whilst such diversity in assessment can provide greater inclusivity, Kelly (2017) claims that the range of assessments used in BTEC qualifications may not provide adequate preparation for more traditional universities which, he suggests, can rely on end of module examinations for assessment. This may, in part, explain why such traditional universities limit entry through a solely BTEC route (Russell Group, 2019).

Nevertheless, BTECs have not escaped the neoliberal performative pressure for increased validity through external assessment. Recent reforms have led to the addition of external assessments (Pearson, n.d.-a), primarily

examinations, in response to Government concerns over grade inflation (Ofqual, 2018a). Michael Gove's (2014) speech on vocational qualifications promised the breaking down of the "the apartheid" (para. 66) between academic and vocational qualifications, apparently through rebuilding vocational qualifications in the image of academic ones. Such changes may be being introduced to limit teacher involvement in assessment. Braun (2018) argues that the addition of externally assessed core unit components of BTECs may better equip students for high-stake examination assessments in HE or may, instead, start to limit BTECs to "more capable" (p. 3) students; presumably, for Braun, "more capable" students refers to students who are confident in examinations.

Vitello and Williamson (2017) argue that the use of external assessment in vocational qualifications can have more disadvantages than advantages. Although they suggest that there may be some advantages to increasing aspects of quality such as validity, these may be outweighed by disadvantages such as the demoralising effect on students of external, often examination-based, assessment and the lack of vocational context of some of these assessments (Vitello & Williamson, 2017). The importance of confidence in assessment is highlighted by Gartland and Smith (2015), who identified that some BTEC students found the move to assessment through coursework rather than examinations a positive experience in rebuilding their identities as learners after poorer than expected GCSE results. This may be why Gicheva and Petrie (2018) found a significant difference between students who achieved the same grades at GCSE who study either BTEC or A level, with BTEC students having higher UCAS points than A level students: "Worryingly, this could suggest that BTEC performance is not a clear representation of a student's ability" (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018, p. 21). Alternatively, A levels may not provide a clear representation, although they are the standard against which all other qualifications are measured. Gicheva and Petrie (2018) do note that the wider range of assessment methods used in BTEC may allow more accurate assessment of achievement of demonstrated outcomes. They also note that BTEC courses may more fully reflect a student's interests and enjoyment than studying GCSEs, thus

boosting performance, perhaps an indication of the students regaining a learner identity, as Gartland and Smith (2015) argue. Possibly, instead of problematizing BTEC qualifications, a more critical view might be taken of A levels. The current study gives voice to the participants' own experiences of assessment in different qualifications, and how this can affect their learner identity.

Combination students, with their experiences of both academic and vocational teaching and learning, may be in a unique position in developing skills for use in HE and in employment. The combination of qualifications might, for WP students, be both accessible and empowering. However, there have been limited qualitative or quantitative studies looking specifically at how combination students experience their mix of teaching, learning and assessment. Most pertinent to this topic are the studies by Myhill and others (Myhill et al., 2019b; Myhill & Morris, 2019; Myhill & Venner, 2019) which consider the voices of students transitioning to university with A levels, alternative qualifications and a combination. These have been discussed through the literature review, particularly in relation to assessment. The current study will add to this literature by considering individuals' experiences of decision-making around a combination of qualifications, and subsequent transition to HE.

In summary, the literature demonstrates that there is limited research into the decision-making of students who enter HE with both A levels and BTEC qualifications. Whilst quantitative studies identify that these students are increasing in number, there has been limited research into how these students decide on entering HE, and how their previous education supports their transition to and through university. Combination students appear to have a similar socioeconomic background to those studying BTEC alone, in that they are primarily from WP backgrounds and may be first in family to enter HE. As such, they have limited resources, that is social, cultural and economic capital, to draw on when deciding on HE. However, their experience of teaching, learning and assessment in both A levels and BTEC may provide them with skills that they can apply to their academic transition to and through university. The next chapter sets out the theory and practice

behind the methodology used to explore such students' perceptions of their decision-making and transition to HE.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This research explores the participants' perceptions of their academic decisions, and how these decisions have supported their transition to the study university. The questions asked within this research mould how to seek the answers. The chapter will firstly situate myself as researcher, considering how my own educational and professional experiences shape the research. I will then explore how my understanding of truth and knowledge shapes the research process. It will then consider the methodological process of the research, exploring the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, including a justification for the use of IPA as a methodology, as a means of foregrounding the lived experiences of the three participants. In this chapter, I also justify the methods used for data collection and the processes of analysis and interpretation at the heart of IPA. The chapter will explain the role of reflexivity within the research process, to provide transparency for the reader in how data were interpreted and certain themes privileged. Furthermore, there will be consideration of how the research is based upon the process of embedding ethical considerations throughout the research lifecycle.

### **My role within the research**

My own experiences permeate this research. The interpretative nature of the research process means that my experiences and beliefs will be found within the research. The study is based on my interests, from my own educational background and from professional experiences. The interpretations that I draw from the participants' stories are seen through the lenses of my own history, social location and positions within education systems. Positionality involves demonstrating that the researcher understands how their own experiences can, and indeed will, influence their research (Foote & Bartell, 2011). I therefore outline below some of the experiences that mould my interest in this research topic and how I interpret the participants' experiences.

### **My educational background: first in family**

My interest in the topic of transition to university stems, in part, both from my own academic experiences, and also from my work experiences. I was, and currently remain, the only member of my wider family to study at university. Other family members have moved from post-compulsory schooling into apprenticeships or straight into employment. Indeed, I only entered sixth form to study A levels when I was rejected for a Youth Training Scheme, possibly as a result of being over-qualified. I chose to study for a degree only after visiting a university with my school, my first contact with anything to do with university. My decisions were limited by my and my family's lack of knowledge of HE, but I was accepted by my first 'choice' of university – the one I had visited with school. I was also lucky that I could go to university at a time when there were no tuition fees and I was fully supported by grants, and so the experience cost little financially.

Although I had no familial narrative of university to draw on, I mostly felt, as Bourdieu describes, a “fish in water” (Wacquant, 1989, p. 43), at home in the academic environment, or at least in the lectures and assessments. Since starting my doctoral study, I have become aware that this feeling of being a part of a world of which I had no familial knowledge is rare. Rather, students with little knowledge of HE often feel as a “fish out of water” in their transition to university (Reay et al., 2010, p. 1107). This lack of knowledge of the implicit academic conventions in HE that first generation and WP students can experience (Roberts & Reid, 2014) is frequently brought home to me in my current job role as an academic skills adviser (ASA) in the study university.

Starting this doctoral study did, at times, leave me feeling like a “fish out of water” (Reay et al., 2010, p. 1107). Although by this stage in my educational career, and as a result of my employment within HE, I understood many of the processes of HE, the subject itself was challenging. Prior to the course, I had little to no knowledge of sociological theory. As I sat in my first lecture, listening to the lecturer and fellow students talk about theorists, I wondered how to spell Foucault, having assumed that he must have been a Japanese philosopher called Fuko. Yet, when discussion moved to Bourdieu, I felt an

almost visceral reaction to his theories. They explained so much of my experiences. For example, why, as the wife of a Cambridge Fellow, I felt out of place on our occasional visits to the College's High Table dinners, and how I could never bring myself to walk on the grass in the college quads (a privilege permitted to Fellows and their guests) – I did not belong. Familiarity with HE processes and vocabulary has, over time, eroded these memories of discomfort and feelings of not belonging, but this study has given me the opportunity to reflect.

### **My professional position: at the boundary**

Becoming an academic skills adviser was not a direct journey. I worked for a number of years in the food industry, including training factory employees for food safety certificates - often the only certificate of education many of the older workers had achieved. It is only on reflection now that I realise that this is where I began to understand the importance of vocational qualifications, having never taken them myself. For employees who had left school being told they were stupid, or who had difficulty with reading, it was a proud moment for them to receive their certificates – a formal validation of their learning, and I was a small cog in their achievement. From industry I moved to become a lecturer in further education (FE) and HE in FE. As an FE lecturer, I taught and assessed BTEC qualifications and considered them to be a robust and academic form of qualification, albeit a qualification which clearly articulated to a vocational area. This experience has allowed me to appreciate the diverse strengths of students with non-traditional entry qualifications for HE. My experience of teaching and mentoring vocational students, and the relative gaps in achievement at HE of vocational students (Aspinall et al., 2017; Gill, 2018; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014; Shields & Masardo, 2015, 2018) have given me some understanding of how such students experience the transition to HE.

As part of a team teaching both FE and HE in the college, I supported students into HE who had not previously considered a degree. It appeared to be a norm within the department that BTEC students went on to HE with us. Yet, as I look back, I also see evidence that whilst we appeared to be wholly supportive of the students in applying to HE, as a team we were pressured

by senior management to 'convert' our BTEC level 3 students to our HE courses, rather than providing impartial advice on what might best suit the individual student. This pressure to meet conversion targets is not in itself symbolic violence as in this case the hegemonic power (many of the lecturers, myself included) were deliberate in their actions. Bourdieu (2000) argues that generally, both hegemonic power and subordinates are unaware of the reinforcement of the social norms. However, reflecting on this experience has increased my sensitivity to similar student experiences that could be considered through the theory of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000) by highlighting how taken-for-granted practices may not have the best interests of students at heart.

Within my current role, as an ASA in the field of HE, I have become aware of the negative perception of BTECs as a means of supporting entry to HE. That is not to say that those working in HE necessarily consider A levels as the ideal preparation for studying at university. Indeed, Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986) note that since the 1950s there has been concern over lack of preparation for students entering HE, necessitating academic skills support once they enter university. However, as A levels are often described as the 'gold standard' (DfE, 2016a) of post 16 education for entry into HE, it is clear that alternative qualifications, such as BTEC, are not perceived as of the same standard. My role, now, is what Lillis (2001) calls a "knowledgeable insider" (p. 9), supporting students to interpret the implicit academic conventions of HE which, as Leathwood and Read (2009) argue, are more embedded within families with greater social and educational capital. I, too, am now rooted within the institution's policies and implicit conventions of academia. I discussed in a previous Doctoral assessment that my role can be seen as both supportive to students but also a role that maintains structural inequalities within the organisation through moulding students to the university's requirements, rather than the organisation making structural changes to better support the increasingly diverse student population.

All of the above experiences will mould this research: from the choice of research question, through the questions I ask of the participants, and how I interpret their stories of their lived experience. Reflecting on my experiences

has also given me the opportunity to consider assumptions I have held. For example, my own reactions to the research process helped to highlight three broad attitudes and assumptions: that the participants would make active decisions to study a combination of qualifications; that the participants would have a linear journey from school to university, and little expectation that assessment would be a key focus of the participants. Reflecting now on these assumptions, they appear counter-intuitive to my own experiences in supporting students at the case study university, particularly because many do not have a straightforward route to HE. My own experiences permeate my assumptions much more than I expected.

This chapter, as well as exploring the theory and implementation of IPA, also addresses how the role of the researcher can inform the study, rather than attempting to remove my own lived experience. Whilst I cannot put myself into the position of combination students in the study university, my experiences of support and teaching in both FE and HE can give me some insight into the lived experiences of such students.

### **The journey to interpretative research**

My own academic background has been primarily within science, and both my undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations were research projects based on experiments, to attempt to discover the truth within the confines of carefully controlled environments. However, more recently, my employment has been within education, outwith the carefully controlled environment of the laboratory. This change in setting, to work with humans in a social world, has led me to re-evaluate my understanding of how knowledge can be constructed. As Cresswell (2013) states, our philosophical assumptions are deeply ingrained and related to our prior experiences and the academic community within which we work. As a member of the education community, my world views have moved to encompass a more nuanced understanding of what is meant by truth and knowledge.

My interest in the lived experience of students who have studied both A levels and BTEC qualifications prior to attending university has led me to consider the philosophical and methodological approach most congruent

to exploring the individual participants' experiences. What follows in this chapter, therefore, is an explanation of how my interest in exploring lived experience in these students, and my philosophical position with regard to this topic, form the foundation of the methodology, and methods, used within the research.

### **Why use IPA?**

A desire to explore the lived experience of individuals cannot be based on a philosophical belief that there is one truth that can be discovered through research. Rather, when exploring the lived experience of others, I understand that there is no one objective truth. That is, my ontological belief is one of relativism, where the perceived reality of a phenomenon differs between individuals, based on their prior experiences and cultural and historical background (Moon & Blackman, 2014). This contrasts with a positivist or post-positivist ontology, where reality is perceived as independent of the observer (Sparkes, 1992). When considering and interpreting the experiences of combination students, my own experiences and background will inform my interpretations of participants' experiences.

From this relativist position on what is meant by truth comes my understanding of knowledge. Again, my belief is that there is not one concrete form of knowledge. Instead, it evolves through individuals' interactions within the social world, embedded within the cultural and temporal context of the individual, what Crotty (1998) calls a constructionist epistemological position. That is, meaning is created by interactions between researcher and participants. With regard to these interactions between myself and the participants, Lowes and Prowse (2001) stress the importance of the co-participation of both researcher and participant in the data collection process, with each gaining understanding of the other – what Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons”, (as cited in Kimball & Garrison, 1996). That is, my interpretation of the participants' experiences serves to produce greater understanding (Kimball & Garrison, 1996). My own experiences and beliefs are therefore an integral part of the development of knowledge within the research.

Intimately linked to both my understanding of truth and of how knowledge is formed is the theoretical perspective of the research. A theoretical perspective can be thought of as a means to identify assumptions that support use of a specific research methodology (Crotty, 1998). A theoretical perspective that assumes that there is a single truth that can be reached would be at variance with my ontological and epistemological viewpoints. As such, it would be incongruent and, from an ethical viewpoint, inappropriate (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012), to use a theoretical perspective not aligned with these beliefs. Rather, my ontological and epistemological views draw me to interpretivism as a theoretical perspective with which to explore the research questions. Interpretative qualitative research uses the meanings that people bring to an experience in order to make sense of that experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The subject of this research is the way in which students perceive that their post-16 education has supported their transition to university. As such, I am asking the participants to both describe and interpret their experiences through the interview process. This social interaction may lead to deeper understanding of the participants' experiences (Scotland, 2012). The importance of the voices of individuals within the research, that is, students who have experience of both BTEC and A levels, is supported by an interpretivist perspective.

The methodology chosen is IPA, a methodology frequently used to explore a homogeneous group of individuals' lived experiences and perceptions of an event (Smith et al., 2009). The focus of the research was to explore the lived experience of combination students. It was therefore important to use a methodology congruent with the desire to explore and interpret that experience using my own experiences as a means of interpretation. A number of qualitative methodologies could have been used to gather data, but I considered IPA to be the most consistent with the research questions. I highlight below some alternative methodologies that were considered and justify why I used IPA instead.

A frequently used qualitative methodology in social sciences is grounded theory. This is a way of generating theory, grounded within the data (Atkinson Coffey & Delamont, 2003). However, this research study was not looking to

generate theory but instead explore lived experiences and relate these experiences to existing theories. Clarke (2007) argues that grounded theory is of use when exploring a social process “articulated in the gerund form connoting ongoing action” (p. 425) rather than as a reflection on experiences that may have passed, such as within this study where participants reflect on and interpret past experiences and decisions. Furthermore, as Riessman (1993) argues, the focus of grounded theory is on generating generalising theories, rather than privileging individuals’ experiences. Grounded theory was therefore considered an unsuitable methodology for the specific research questions in this study.

More aligned with my desire to privilege the individual voice of participants is thematic analysis (TA). It is used to explore patterns and themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2022), much like IPA. However, it differs from IPA in that IPA sits within a clear theoretical framework: TA is described as a method (or group of methods) of data analysis rather than a methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and can sit within a range of theoretical frameworks. Whilst this is more of a conceptual difference, it is important as the theoretical framework within which a method or methodology sits holds assumptions around what the researcher understands about truth and reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Another difference between IPA and TA is that IPA retains a focus on individuals, even when themes are seen across a number of participants (Smith et al., 2009). In contrast, TA focuses more on themes across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and so loses some of the idiographic nature of IPA. This is of particular importance with a small number of participants, where themes may not be found across all participants. TA, therefore, was discounted.

A third alternative method that I could have used was that of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis has clear overlaps with IPA in that they both use the participants’ narratives of an experience (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, both processes involve not just description but also interpretation, on the part of the participant, reflecting back on their experiences (Padgett, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). However, narrative analysis differs from IPA in its focus on the story as a whole, rather than themes within

the data (Wong & Breheny, 2018) and on the linguistic structures that the participants use to tell their story (Padgett, 2012). Once again, the importance of drawing on themes, whether across or within participants' stories, means that IPA is most suitable. IPA, then, allows us to explore and interpret participant experiences and draw out themes that may encompass some or all participants, or a single participant.

The following section will consider the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, to further justify its use. Further, it will identify the key stages of the process, to give the reader an understanding of the ways in which decisions in my interpretation of the data have been made during analysis, to provide transparency to the analysis process.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: an introduction**

Although IPA itself is a relatively new methodology, devised by Smith in the 1990s (Smith et al., 2009), it is rooted in the longstanding research traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Whilst IPA originated in the field of psychology (see, for example, Eatough & Smith, 2006; Osborn & Smith, 1998; Rhodes & Smith, 2010), it has been used extensively in other fields, including education (Cooper, Fleischer & Cotton, 2012; Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Noon, 2018) where questions about the meaning participants place on their experiences are important.

IPA is described by Smith et al. (2009) as an “approach” (p. 11) to qualitative research. It has also been more clearly described as a methodology (Smith & Osborn, 2015b); that is, IPA can be considered as a form of qualitative research that shapes and justifies our methods of data collection and analysis (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Crotty, 1998). IPA can be used as a methodology when the researcher seeks to gain an understanding of participants' reflections on their experiences of the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008) and how they make sense of it (Eatough & Smith, 2006). The purpose of this study is to explore how the participants made decisions about post-16 and post-18 qualification and how they felt that their prior qualifications supported the transition to university, so IPA is a suitable methodology to explore the participants' perceptions.

Lopez and Willis (2004) argue that a clear understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of a methodology is important in articulating the purpose of the research. The theoretical underpinnings also inform and shape the processes of data collection and analysis. In this section, therefore, I will explore the theory behind IPA and how this shapes the methods used both to gather data and to analyse that data.

### **Theoretical underpinnings of IPA**

IPA is, Smith et al. (2009) argue, developed from three theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Each of these will be explored in turn, in order to establish the relevance of the methodology for this specific study. The first theoretical underpinning to be explored is phenomenology.

### **The role of phenomenology within IPA: from description to interpretation**

Phenomenology can be defined as a philosophy dedicated to describing and understanding phenomena (Moran, 2000). Initially developed by Husserl as a means of solely describing the fundamental essences of experience (Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994), it was developed by Heidegger to incorporate interpretation as well as analysis (Moran, 2000; Smith et al., 2009). It is this interpretative strand of phenomenology that is used within IPA.

Smith et al. (2009) draw on Heidegger's work within phenomenology as part of the theoretical underpinnings of the IPA methodology. Heidegger, rather than considering the purpose of phenomenology to be to describe the essence of an experience, seeks to interpret the experience (Cerbone, 2008; Heidegger, 1953/2010). Within Heidegger's phenomenology, there is an understanding that the researcher cannot truly set aside what Heidegger calls their 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1953/2010; Lowes & Prowse, 2001). Understandings come, instead, from interpreting interactions with others through shared culture, experiences and language (Lowes & Prowse, 2001). Within this study, phenomenological interpretation is used to interpret the participants' experiences, acknowledging my own prior experiences. From Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, then, Heidegger develops

hermeneutic phenomenology (Cerbone, 2008), which introduces the second theoretical underpinning of IPA: hermeneutics.

### **Hermeneutics in IPA: Circles of interpretation**

Hermeneutic phenomenology moves on from the purely descriptive phenomenology of Husserl. Heidegger brings to phenomenological research the act of interpretation, through hermeneutics. As Heidegger (1953/2010) states, “Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its lead beforehand from what is sought” (p. 4). Here, it is clear to see that Heidegger stresses that we cannot remove our fore-conceptions of what we want from research. Both our research questions, and our analysis, are always moulded by our prior experiences.

In IPA, interpretation is used to explore participant responses that may only be partially expressed or only inferred through use of, for example, metaphor. Smith (2018) draws on Heidegger (1953/2010) to identify that phenomena under examination may be hidden, or obscured, but “also connected with what is already visible” (Smith, 2018, p. 5). Through hermeneutic phenomenology, that is, interpretation of the text, and how it is expressed drawn from individuals’ experiences, Smith (2018) believes that meaning can be uncovered, although one might suggest that it is a meaning that can be uncovered as within interpretative research, there can be no single, true, interpretation. In practice, this means that my own interpretation is not the only interpretation but based within my own experiences.

There are important differences between descriptive phenomenology and interpretative phenomenology in relation to the role of prior knowledge. Finlay (2014) stresses the importance of bracketing prior experiences and assumptions as part of the phenomenological sensibility. Bracketing is advocated by Husserl in his descriptive phenomenology (Moran, 2000), in order to come to the research with few prior assumptions and is certainly suggested as a feature by Smith et al. (2009) in their guide to performing IPA. However, close study of Smith et al.’s (2009) work suggests that their interpretation of bracketing is not to educe a phenomenon’s essence. Rather,

it is more akin to what Finlay (2014) calls the development of a “phenomenological sensibility” (p. 121) to help novice researchers understand the phenomenological attitude of gaining an understanding of participants’ lived experience.

As part of developing a phenomenological attitude, Van Manen (2011) describes what he calls the “hermeneutic reduction” (para. 1). This is a reflection on prior experiences and predispositions, so that one can be open within both the data collection and analysis stages of phenomenological research. This, to me, appears a more realistic form of bracketing than that proposed by Husserl (Moran, 2000) and other descriptive phenomenologists, such as Giorgi (2010a, 2010b), where prior experiences need to be set aside, to find the pure phenomenological essence of an experience. Throughout the process of research, from conception to analysis and writing up, I will maintain the Heideggerian reflexive hermeneutic approach to situating myself in the research and as part of the research through reflexivity, rather than attempting to remove myself and the context of the research through bracketing, which I believe is not possible. As Sloan and Bowe (2014) state, reflexivity is “the antithesis to the principle of bracketing out influences” (p. 1297). Chan, Fung and Chien (2013) argue that two key methods can be used to demonstrate validity in the absence of being able to fully bracket our preconceptions. The first is the use of reflexivity to identify our own preconceptions. The second is to provide the participants with an overview of the analysis, to ascertain if they can recognise their own experiences within the analysis (Chan et al., 2013; Morrow, Rodriguez & King, 2015), based on Colaizzi’s descriptive phenomenological analytical method. Two of the three participants in my own study responded to this sense-check, which was sent as part of a follow-up email, replying that they recognised the themes.

In IPA, the interpretative role of the researcher is explicit. Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2015a) refer to the double hermeneutic – the participant is making sense of their experiences during the interview; the researcher then seeks to make sense of the participant’s own sense-making. Goldspink and Engward (2018) discuss the importance of Smith et al.’s (2009) double hermeneutic of movement between “interpreter and

interpreted” (Goldspink & Engward, 2018, p. 6), leading to a more nuanced understanding. The importance of this interpretative approach is highlighted by McAuley, Munro and Taylor (2018); they argue that it is difficult for the researcher to access the participant’s own world view, but a critical understanding on the part of the researcher can bring depth to the participant’s data and get as close as possible (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006) to the participant’s thoughts. As Grant and Giddings (2002) argue, it is the role of the interpretative researcher to interpret the participants’ experiences in ways that the participants themselves may not have explored. However, Smith (2018) makes the important distinction that the researcher’s interpretation can only be second order – we cannot directly access the participants’ experiences. Instead, the researcher aims to make sense of the participant’s own sense-making. The importance of participants as individuals, with their own perceptions of their experiences, is explored in the next section, on the idiographic nature of IPA, the third theoretical underpinning of IPA identified by Smith et al. (2009).

### **Idiography: The importance of individual experience**

Much of the current research into combination students has been quantitative (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018; Mian et al., 2016; Richards, 2016; UCAS, 2016a), providing an overview of the increase in numbers of these students progressing to HE. However, what can be missing within such research is the nuance of individual stories as to how and why students made such decisions, and how their decisions have supported their transition to university. Peck and Mummery (2019) argue for a return to the idiographic in qualitative research, to prioritise the unique and particular experiences of individuals. For this detail, IPA’s idiographic focus is of benefit. Idiography is concerned with privileging the individual voices of participants (Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Whilst more general themes can be drawn from individuals’ experiences, this is not the primary concern of IPA. Instead, Smith (2018) introduces the importance of ‘identity’ in meaning making, suggesting that “The articulation of meaning as being of a particular thing, for a particular person, within a particular context also speaks to IPA’s

idiographic commitment” (p. 4). That is, as the participant and researcher make meaning through the interview, and the researcher continues to make meaning through the analysis, individual contexts and experiences mould the meaning-making. Thus, IPA is a means of exploring and exposing individual experiences, rather than aiming to educe generalisable theories.

Nevertheless, some IPA researchers (see, for example, Wagstaff, Jeong, Nolan, Wilson & Twedlie, 2014) express concern over the tension between the idiographic nature of the methodology and Smith et al.’s (2009) guidance on developing overarching themes. Smith et al. (2009) are at pains to ensure that IPA practitioners work flexibly with the guidelines, so there may be sufficient leeway for omitting overarching themes if idiography is a key concern. Furthermore, the flexibility of the technique allows for the highlighting of individual themes, which may only occur within one participant’s narrative as Smith et al. (2009) note that unlike for some methods of data analysis, such as content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016), frequency of use is not an important aspect of data analysis in IPA. This can allow for contradictions both within and between individual experiences to be highlighted.

### **Participants: Finding combination students**

In IPA, an homogeneous participant sample is used, so that the participants can reflect on and discuss their perceptions of the experience under consideration (Smith et al., 2009). Purposive sampling was therefore used to select participants who would be able to discuss the experience of studying both A levels and BTEC. Participants were drawn from second year undergraduate students with this combination of qualifications. This group of students was identified as they will have had sufficient experience of studying in HE to be able to consider how their prior experiences have impacted on their transition to HE but were also not so distant from the transition that they would struggle to remember how they felt about the transition.

Requests for participation were placed on the study university’s web portal, and also emailed to departmental administrators, for dissemination to

relevant year groups of students. Habel and Whitman (2016) note that students who respond to requests for research are more likely to be engaged; consequently, those students who responded felt sufficiently strongly about their experiences, either positively or negatively, to respond to the call for participants. Whilst this may suggest that such students are not representative of all combination students, it must be remembered that IPA is idiographic (Smith et al., 2009), and so it is the individual story that is important, as well as alignment and contradictions between participants, rather than any generalisability.

Three participants were interviewed. Based on the previous year's entry data, where 327 students entered the study university with a combination of BTEC and A level qualifications, a response rate of less than 1% was achieved. Smith et al. (2009) stress that "there is no right answer to the question of the sample size" (p. 51) as depth of analysis is of greater importance than breadth of data (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). However, Wagstaff et al. (2014) note that researchers not familiar with the IPA methodology can often question the small sample size. Whilst some authors continue to recruit participants until they feel that data saturation has been reached (Cooper et al., 2012), data saturation as it is understood in a methodology such as grounded theory (Saunders et al., 2018) is not a part of IPA (Hale, Treharne & Kitas, 2007). Instead, Saunders et al. (2018) argue that for narrative qualitative techniques such as IPA, saturation should be considered as the completeness of a participant's story. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), rather than the number of participants being important it is the depth and richness of the data and its analysis. Smith et al. (2009) note the move over time from larger numbers of participants to an increasing number of single case studies (see, for example, Eatough & Smith, 2006; see also Carpenter's [2009] summary of a number of studies). Indeed, the richness of one participant's story (Ted) almost compelled me to focus solely on his case. Finlay (2009) suggests three to six participants provides sufficient data to allow for cross-participant analysis and theme development, without the amount of data becoming overwhelming. All participants have had experience of teaching, learning and assessment in A levels, BTEC level

three and HE, so as to be able to reflect on the impact of these experiences on their learning journey.

### **Data collection: the role of the interview**

Data from IPA typically comes from semi-structured interviewing of participants (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015a). Fully structured interviews do not provide the opportunities for respondents to develop their answers, nor to explore other areas that may be of interest (Smith & Osborn, 2015a). Semi-structured interviews allow the participants the freedom to discuss the subject in a rich and detailed way but still provide some structure to encourage both researcher and participant to keep to the areas of interest (Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the dialogic nature of the interview allowed me to deviate from the schedule when areas of potential interest were discussed by participants.

One aspect of interviewing that Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) highlight can be an issue for novice researchers is an over-reliance on an extensive and therefore, they argue, constraining interview schedule. Whilst questions within my own interview schedule are extensive (Appendix B), this approach gives the participants the opportunity to discuss the topics through natural progression of their thought processes rather than through prompting.

To avoid the imposition of predisposed ideas on the interview schedule and interview questioning process, a small number of studies have avoided developing literature reviews before the interview process and analysis were complete (for example, Robson, 2002). However, due to my current role, and my previous research on the topic of vocational qualifications and transition as part of my Doctoral studies, I cannot remove my prior knowledge and, indeed, prior experience may lead to richer interpretation. Nevertheless, there is scope for participants to discuss areas which I had not initially considered. Noon (2018) considers that one strength of IPA as a methodology is that the inductive nature of the research and interview process allows the participant to discuss the experiences of importance to them. These can sometimes take the interview into unexpected places, necessitating the researcher to think on their feet and respond with

appropriate questions (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). As IPA is an iterative process (Smith et al., 2009), the introduction of unexpected themes leads to further reading and analysis by the researcher.

King (2014) identifies that it is useful for the beginner researcher to have outline questions to guide the interview. However, within IPA, where the areas of interest are primarily drawn from the participants' own experiences, there is also a need to have the courage and intuition to deviate from the interview schedule to explore emerging areas of interest. This was certainly true in the interviews undertaken. For example, whilst questions on assessment were within the interview schedule, I had not anticipated the importance of this area to each individual participant, and so further prompting questions were used to elicit greater depth around some answers.

Interviews were conducted in private, on university premises, during normal university working hours. Participants could have a colleague sit with them if they did not feel comfortable alone in the interview, but none took up this opportunity. Interviews lasted around 60 to 90 minutes. Throughout the interview process, I listened actively for possible signs of distress and was ready to stop the direction of questions. See, for example, Mathew's transcript:

M: Yes. The, the... my family background, my stepdad's...

I: You don't have to talk about this if you don't...

M: Yeah, no, I'm comfortable and it's absolutely fine. [Mathew, 141-143]

The interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder, as a verbatim transcription is required (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Permission for recording was obtained from each participant as part of the informed consent form completed prior to interview by the participant and ongoing consent was assumed through continued participation in the process. The audio recordings were listened to several times before transcription, to immerse myself within the data. Transcription of the audio data was verbatim, including noting any significant pauses, repetitions, and other key verbal aspects, such as laughter and tone of voice. These aspects

of communication can provide important context on what the participant finds difficult to discuss or finds important.

In IPA the participant has limited input into the research process. LeCompte (2000) argues that involving participants within qualitative data analysis can increase the validity of the research. However, Smith et al. (2009) do not discuss the role of the participant within the process apart from the interview. By courtesy, I provided a transcript of their interview to each participant, for them to check for accuracy and make any comments. No participants asked for any changes or clarifications. After analysis, I provided the participants with an overview of the themes within the research. Again, participants made no comments on the themes other than thanking me for the information.

After transcription, the interview data are analysed according to Smith et al.'s (2009) six stages. Whilst the stages appear sequential, part of the process of IPA is its iterative nature (Noon, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, the process of analysis is more complex than the six stages appear to make it. The six steps are discussed in the next section.

### **Data analysis: immersion and interpretation**

Smith et al. (2009) outline the stages of analysis in IPA as follows:

1. Reading and re-reading
2. Initial noting
3. Developing emergent themes
4. Exploring connections between emergent themes
5. Exploring the next interview data
6. Looking for cross participant themes. (Smith et al., 2009)

Whilst Smith et al. (2009) are at pains to argue that the above steps are just guidance, the steps were used within this study as a means of producing a consistent study, where analysis could be traced back to the raw data. The use of this framework also aligns this study's methodology with both past and future IPA studies. This stepwise analysis allows for auditing of the analysis, to determine the validity of the interpretation (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, as a novice researcher, the stepwise process of

analysis through the six stages gave confidence in being able to perform a new skill using an established approach.

### **Step 1. Reading and re-reading**

Immersion within the data is an important aspect of IPA. As well as starting to note the nuances of what was said, the re-reading provides an opportunity to understand the overall structure of the interview, as well as to notice repetitions, use of metaphors and times of hesitation (Smith et al., 2009).

Read in conjunction with listening to the audio tape I was able to, as Smith et al. (2009) propose, enter “the participant’s world” (p.82). Finlay (2014) discusses the importance of “dwelling” (p. 125) on the data: “As we dwell, new understandings emerge; data are transformed into meanings” (p. 125). For example, it was only through dwelling on the data when re-reading Shea’s transcript that I identified her differential use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’ when talking about her different qualifications. Dwelling in the data is aided by the recommended iterative nature of data analysis in IPA (Finlay, 2011; Smith et al., 2009) whereby the researcher returns repeatedly to the data and the analysis.

Smith et al. (2009) discuss the role of the “hermeneutic circle” (p. 27) within the IPA methodology. This refers to the moving of the researcher from examining the part (that is, individual fragments of text) to the whole (whole sentence, whole interview) and back (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). The constant focus and refocus between part and whole, the hermeneutic circle, informs the analysis. The hermeneutic circle might then be extended to explore the areas of convergence and divergence between different participants. However, whilst it is important to explore these links between participants it must be recognised that IPA is also idiographic, and individuals’ experiences must be foregrounded. For example, in Shea’s account, it was initially clear to see her references to ‘we’ when she discussed her A levels; however, it was only after moving repeatedly from fragments to reviewing the larger structure of the interview data, that Shea’s separation of herself from BTEC was clearer by her differential use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’. I could then go back into the detail of the text to

explore this theme further – the hermeneutic circle. Only after immersion in the data can the next step, initial noting, start.

### **Step 2. Initial noting**

Once immersed within the data, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that initial noting is started. Initial noting can be descriptive, notes on the linguistic structure of the data (such as use of pronouns, hesitations, laughter), and conceptual, where interpretation starts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Whilst Smith et al. (2009) recommend annotating on the left-hand margin, I have found that using two columns (one for descriptive comments and one for linguistic and more conceptual comments) has helped develop my analysis from merely descriptive (see Appendix C for an extract of Ted's annotated transcript). As Gauntlett et al. (2017) and Noon (2018) argue, such analysis should be open-minded, based on the data, rather than on themes within the published literature.

### **Step 3. Developing emergent themes**

Once initial noting is completed, the notes are used to draw out emerging themes from the data. This may be descriptive, using the participant's own words, but can also be interpretative thoughts of the researcher (Cooper et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Whilst interpretation is a key part of the analysis, it must always be grounded in the idiographic data (Smith & Osborn, 2015a). Appendix D is an extract from Ted's table of themes.

### **Step 4: Making connections across emergent themes**

After noting emergent themes, the themes are grouped into a coherent structure by developing higher themes. At this stage, some themes are discarded. It is the nature of IPA that the researcher will privilege some themes over others, a challenge highlighted by Wagstaff et al. (2014). However, Goldspink and Engward (2018) state: "IPA is not about getting insights right or wrong; rather, it is about taking ownership and presenting readers of the IPA research with a report which clearly traces observations, thinking and conclusions back to the data." (p. 8). Documenting the making of connections across themes is a way of authenticating the development of

ideas and grounding them in the data. The reader may not agree with the choice of themes developed by the researcher, but the process of analysis demonstrates why those choices were made and how they are rooted in the data. These higher order themes are then grouped into a number of superordinate themes (see Appendix E for Ted's super-ordinate themes). Smith et al. (2009) recommend no more than three to four superordinate themes, although this is not prescriptive.

### **Step 5: Moving on to the next participant**

Once the analysis of one participant is complete, it moves onto the next participant. Participants were interviewed in the order that they responded for the request for participants; That is, Shea, followed by Ted and finally Mathew. Each interview was transcribed and initially analysed before the next participant was interviewed.

A final table of overarching themes is produced through an iterative process of revisiting participants' themes (Noon, 2018) and clustering of similar themes (Smith et al., 2009). It must again be acknowledged that I, as a researcher with my own past experiences, will privilege certain themes and the choice of overarching themes is a subjective process. Whilst others might choose different themes to privilege, rooting of the themes within the rich data provided should persuade the reader of the validity of those themes.

Whilst Smith et al. (2009) suggest bracketing off ideas from prior cases, to look afresh at the next data set, they also acknowledge that there will be influences from previous cases. That is, our fore-conceptions (Heidegger, 1953/2010) are changed through the process of analysing the previous case and we cannot return to that place where we once were, before the analysis. However, Smith et al. (2009) argue that the stepwise analysis of IPA helps to ensure that each individual case is analysed systematically, allowing new themes to be identified. During the analysis of subsequent cases, areas of convergence and divergence of themes are noted, before developing a master table of superordinate themes for the group as a whole (step 6) (Smith and Osborn, 2015a). Because of the iterative nature of IPA, as new

themes are observed in later cases, previous transcripts are reviewed to determine whether these themes are present in previous cases.

### **Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases**

The final stage in IPA is drawing out themes across cases, to produce a superordinate master table, where the researcher looks for connections across cases and for themes that have a particular resonance (Smith et al., 2009). The cross-case themes can only capture some of the detail drawn from the data of individual cases, and so the analysis within the results section and discussion will continue to draw on data outwith these superordinate master themes, to ensure the idiographic nature of the methodology is not lost.

The superordinate master theme table (see extract in Appendix F) highlights the overarching themes. As can be seen, some themes are specific to an individual participant (for example, Ted's theme of from failure to validation) whilst many are found across all three participants.

Smith et al.'s (2009) guidance provided a stepwise procedure for me, as a novice researcher, to follow. This procedure provides transparency to the analysis process, including the privileging of certain themes within the data. Transparency is one aspect of quality with which a qualitative methodology such as IPA can be assessed. The next section of this chapter will discuss against what other standards this research should be judged.

### **Considerations on determining the quality of the study**

Quality of research that uses a qualitative approach is an area of contestation. Typically, there has been pressure for qualitative research to conform to the quality standards of quantitative research, in being generalisable and reproducible (Mays & Pope, 2000). However, IPA as a methodology is idiographic and so does not seek to produce generalisable results. Furthermore, because of its interpretative nature, whilst the *process* of analysis can be reproduced, it is possible that different researchers might focus on different themes within the data, and so results may not be reproducible. Hence Smith et al. (2009) argue for the use of alternative

methods of assessing quality in IPA, in particular those of Yardley (2000).

Yardley (2000) identifies four characteristics of good qualitative research:

1. Sensitivity to the context of the research;
2. The level of commitment and rigour shown by the research;
3. The level of transparency and coherence within the research;
4. The impact and importance of the research. (Yardley, 2000).

How each of these four characteristics are embedded within the current study will be explored below.

Shinebourne (2011) argues that sensitivity to context can be explored through the context of both theoretical literature and sociocultural context. The current study demonstrates Yardley's (2000) sensitivity to context by exploring the context of combination students within the social and political context of UK HE, drawing on previous research, within Chapters Two and Five. The use of wider theory to explore the data is also a means of demonstrating context (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). Yardley's (2000) concepts of rigour and commitment are demonstrated through the commitment to in-depth analysis of data, and through attentive interview technique (Smith et al., 2009). Commitment within the interview can be demonstrated by my willingness to explore areas that participants wanted to discuss which at first appeared unrelated to the subject under exploration. For example, Ted started to discuss his primary-age schooling; at first, I felt that I should return to the topic I wanted him to discuss. However, I made the decision within the interview to allow him to continue his narrative. From this arose the rich theme within Ted's data of failure and ultimate validation.

Smith et al. (2009) discuss Yardley's (2000) concept of rigour through the depth and thoroughness of the study. Yardley (2000) herself notes that rigour can be demonstrated through complexity of interpretation; for example, this might be demonstrated in an IPA study through the levels of analysis used, from description to more conceptual analysis, such as linking with existing theories. Within my study, I draw on a number of theorists, particularly Bourdieu, to explore the themes drawn from the data. The use of Bourdieu aligns with other accounts of non-traditional HE students'

experiences (see, for example, Bradley et al., 2013; Robbins, 1993; Watson & Widin, 2014).

Transparency and coherence within an IPA study involve the clarity of the research process (Smith et al., 2009). This will include a clear description of the research process, supported by evidence drawn from the process itself (Shinebourne, 2011). Coherence relates both to the coherence of the methodology with the research and with the philosophical perspective (Shinebourne, 2011) and to how compelling is the narrative constructed by the researcher from the data (Smith et al., 2009). Yardley (2000) stresses that the reality provided by the researcher is a construction of a reality, rather than description of it. For example, I, as the researcher, choose which themes to privilege, and construct a narrative to fit those themes. However, the narrative must always be embedded within the data, evidenced by use of excerpts from interviews. McAuley et al. (2018) acknowledge that the interpretative nature of IPA can potentially risk misrepresenting the participants' experiences. However, the use of quotations to illustrate themes allows the reader to understand the interpretation process of the researcher and to judge its methodological and narrative coherence.

Smith et al.'s (2009) comments on Yardley's (2000) final principles for the quality of qualitative research are limited. However, Yardley expands on her two principles of impact and importance. She argues that the impact of the research is a key factor in determining its worth; such impact may be through presenting a new way of exploring a topic. This current study explores in depth the perceptions of combination students on how they made their individual journeys to and through the first year of university. As such, it supports the quantitative data available that indicates an increase in the number of such students, without acknowledging the individual routes and experiences through which they have travelled. This study can therefore help to explain both the challenges and successes of such students within the HE environment, a measure of its importance. That these results are not aimed to be generalisable to the wider population of combination students should not undermine the importance of the idiographic. Instead, if the narrative is sufficiently compelling and embedded within the data, it may show evidence

of “resonating with readers” (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999, p. 218). The reader can consider the relevance of the research to their own context and reflect on insights it may provide for the wider context.

The quality of this study, then, should be considered by how well it meets Yardley’s (2000) four measures of quality within qualitative research.

Evidence provided within both the thesis and appendices will give the reader an understanding of how these measures are met.

### **The importance of researcher reflexivity in IPA**

Reflexivity within phenomenological research can be defined as:

The process of continually reflecting upon our interpretations of both our experience and the phenomenon being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of our previous understandings and our investment in particular research outcomes. (Finlay, 2003b, p. 108).

According to Denovan and Macaskill (2013), reflexivity aids transparency, one of Yardley’s (2000) concepts of quality within interpretative research. It also helps to demonstrate how the researcher’s work has been framed by prior experiences and by assumptions and preconceptions.

This study is situated within an interpretative paradigm. As such, I must acknowledge that I, as the researcher, am active in moulding both data collection and analysis. Analysis performed within an IPA study cannot be separated from the prior experiences of the researcher (Finlay, 2003a). Indeed, it is the prior experiences of the researcher that helps form and inform the area of research interest, moulds the research question and directs data collection and analysis (Gough, 2003; Lowes & Prowse, 2001). It is my responsibility, as the researcher, to recognise possible fore-conceptions (Heidegger, 1953/2010). Pillow (2003) argues that a researcher with some similar experiences to the participants must be careful not to “write ourselves as closer to our subjects” (p. 182). Therefore, although I too was first in family form a working class background to enter HE, I have to recognise my own privileges and experiences that also distance me from the participants, such as my immersion in the both FE and HE environments. As

previously discussed, I do not believe that I can bracket prior experiences and perceptions prior to analysis, so instead I recognise that they exist and that through reflexive thinking they may be uncovered and reflected upon. Whilst some fore-conceptions were apparent to me at the start of the research process and also a necessary part of considering the research question, others were observed only during the interview and analysis stages (see Table 1 for an example). Reflexivity is therefore an ongoing process.

Goldspink and Engward (2018) identify a practical means of recording reflections, which I have sought to employ throughout the data collection and analysis. Two examples of reflection are provided below (Table 1 and Table 2). Each introduces how fore-conceptions can be either highlighted (Table 1) or uncovered (Table 2) by focussing on the meaning of interactions.

**Table 1:**

*Example reflection 1*

05/10/18: An encounter in the library

In the library, after finishing work, to look for a book on Nietzsche. Still wearing my staff badge. A group of students come in – noisy. I inwardly cringe at the noise they're making but don't take much notice.

A few minutes later, one student approaches me, having seen that I'm wearing a staff badge. She asks if I work in the library. I say no and suggest that they go to the front desk.

They still hesitated as I moved away back to my books. They weren't sure what to do. So, I went back, asked them what they were looking for, explained about the importance of the library catalogue number and got one of them to look it up on their phone. The girl who first approached me was told by her colleague to be quieter, as they were in a library, and you're supposed to be quiet. She said she didn't realise – she'd never been in a library before. The students found the number of the book and I pointed them in the direction of the books downstairs, as I had to go.

Their tutor had told them to read chapter two in the book. But for these students, new to university, new to independent learning, what might appear obvious – just finding the book in the first place – was a puzzle and frustrating.

How many students lose heart? Unable to get past the first hurdle thrown up at them by a tutor who has expectations of what we might consider the most basic task?

This has made me think about the unwritten rules of the university – Bernstein's hidden curriculum. Even accessing the knowledge that they are expected to read is new to them. Widening participation students may not have the experience of things that we take for granted – use of a library.

The expectations of staff are at odds with the experiences of students. This is so important to remember!

## Table 2

### *Example reflection 2*

09/09/19

Today, I interviewed my first student. I thought I had no real preconceptions about students coming to the university with a mix of BTEC and A levels. However, after she explained how she had come to have a mix, I realised that I had a preconception that it would be an active choice prior to starting college/sixth form. As it happens, she started out doing three A levels.

SO, I have held, from the conception of this research, the thought that combination students come to do so through an active decision before starting post-16 education; that is, they rationally choose that path and follow it through. I wasn't aware that I was holding this preconception until interviewing Shea. The reality for this student is that she changed because of what she felt would be best for her, appearing to make a rational decision to change one qualification. I have to be open to the many reasons why students may take a mix of qualifications and how they end up doing it.

Areas to consider: decision-making in schooling and HE

These two extracts highlight the importance of reflexivity in grounding the research within the participants' own experiences, rather than those of the researcher. Although I have worked with WP students for a number of years, and supported the development of their academic skills, the process of reflexivity forced me to focus on my own comfort within the HE environment, which is alien to many WP students. The second extract illustrates my own assumptions about the research topic, assuming that the participants would make active decisions to study a combination of qualifications from the start of their post-16 education. Reflexivity, therefore, has been important in maintaining my immersion in and sensitivity to the context of the research.

Reflexivity within interpretative work strengthens the research by bringing to light how prior experiences may impact on analysis of participants' data. Acknowledging the impact of the researcher is an important aspect of ethical research, a subject which will be explored in the next section.

## **Ethical considerations**

All research must be underpinned by ethical considerations (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012) which should be built into every stage of the research process. Smith et al.'s (2009) overview of the IPA research process has limited information on the process of developing an ethical research process, concentrating on the areas of ethics specifically related to participant consent. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) argue, however, that ethical research can only be achieved if it is built within the fabric of the research project from the start. This can be achieved by ensuring that there is coherence between my epistemological and ontological viewpoint, the methodology used, and the research questions. As outlined above, IPA is an appropriate methodology to use when seeking to uncover a truth from participants' perceptions (Smith et al., 2009). In particular, as it developed within health psychology, it has frequently been used for subjects of intense personal concerns and areas with the potential to cause distress. Therefore, despite Smith et al.'s (2009) concern over the mechanics of ethical research rather than a more inclusive view of ethics within the research as a whole, this concern offers a robust practical means of supporting participants within the research process.

As well as having sound theoretical underpinning, it is vital that participants are treated ethically throughout the research process. This study has followed British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2018) ethical guidance for research in education, in addition to the study university's ethical approval process. Voluntary informed consent was gained from all participants. Participants were anonymised using pseudonyms, and identifying material, such as course name at university, were redacted. Participants were informed of their ability to withdraw from the research process, with the caveat that this was only possible until publishing of the thesis. Participants were monitored throughout the interview process; continued contribution to the interview was considered as continued consent (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Undue intrusion into the privacy of the participant's life was avoided, by using an interview schedule, and again monitoring willingness to respond, thus respecting participant privacy (Vanclay, Baines, & Taylor, 2013). Whilst no participants demonstrated any

distress during the process, the participant information sheet (Appendix A), and post-interview thank you email contained information on sources of support. All documentation has been maintained according to the study university research governance handbook and the Data Protection Act of 1998 and the General Data Protection Regulation (BERA, 2018).

There may be ethical concerns around my role as a member of staff at the study university, which might demonstrate a differential in power between student participant and myself. However, my role has no impact on student assessment, and acts as a purely supportive role for students within the university. This may reduce the risk of students perceiving a “sense of obligation” (McGinn, 2018, p. 7) to participate in the study.

It must also be recognised that the research question may potentially cause the participants to question their legitimacy within the academic environment, as it may objectify them through their ‘otherness’ to more traditional students. However, this study provides a voice for students who may have previously been overlooked. By participating in the research voluntarily, the participants themselves were happy to identify as combination students. All participants were keen to give their thoughts on their experiences and to tell their own stories.

### **Limitations of IPA as a methodology**

I have argued above that IPA is a suitable means of answering the research questions. However, I am also aware of what the research cannot achieve. This section will explore the limitations of IPA as a methodology; it will go on to discuss how these are considered within the current study. The limitations can be categorised as follows:

#### **The role of language**

Within IPA, language is used by the participant to explore and explain their lived experience, as it appears to them. This may well involve the verbalisation of complex ideas. As Willig (2008) states, language “adds meanings that reside in the words themselves” (p. 67) and so can distance the researcher from the participant’s experiences. This distance might mean the methodology focusses on how the participants talk about their

experiences, rather than how they feel about that experience. The researcher then further imbues those words with meanings based on their own context and experiences. It could therefore be suggested that IPA cannot truly explore participants' lived experiences. However, as an interpretative form of phenomenology, we are not seeking to merely describe others' experiences but to draw out themes of interest in a way which "comprehensively, respectfully and explicitly incorporates the perspective of both researcher and participant" (Wagstaff et al., 2014). As such, rather than a limitation, the interpretation of the participants' words is a strength, giving voice to combination students.

One other aspect of language which may limit the use of IPA is that because it requires sophisticated use of language to explore experiences, it limits with whom the technique can be used. Shinebourne (2011) notes the importance of language in IPA, what Willig (2008) calls "The representational validity of language" (p. 66). When using IPA, we must assume that participants can use language appropriately as a tool and that language does not limit expression of experience. The technique privileges native speakers of the language of the study, and those who are able to communicate clearly and with some confidence. Those with less fluency in the language of the interview may be excluded (Noon, 2018). Students at university should have a sufficient level of language use to be able to clearly communicate their thoughts. Whilst this assumption cannot be taken for granted, within this study each participant appeared to be able to clearly and eloquently explore their experiences. However, for non-native speakers, an alternative methodology might be required. The two participants who responded to my request raised no comments on the 'sense-check' of the themes I identified, suggesting that their intended meanings were captured appropriately.

### **Lack of generalisability**

Due to its idiographic nature, IPA studies cannot be generalised to a wider population; the very strength of its nature as a methodology is the in-depth explorations of individuals' life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The role of this study is not to consider how combination students in general find their

transition to HE, but to consider individual stories of decisions and transitions within the study university. That is not to say that others may learn nothing of use from the study. Rather, a narrative is provided and explored in relation to the wider academic literature, allowing the reader to understand the participants' rich data and also the process of interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2015a). That the research might chime with the reader's own experiences and context is as far as generalisation of the results may go.

### **Summary of the chapter**

This chapter has introduced the theoretical underpinnings of the research methodology used within the study – IPA. IPA employs phenomenology and hermeneutics to analyse and interpret participants' data. Smith et al.'s (2009) step-by-step process for conducting an IPA study has been explored, as well as the importance of reflexivity and ensuring that ethical considerations are built into the study design. The chapter has considered the analysis process, developing super-ordinate themes for each case, and cross-case super-ordinate themes. The next chapter will consider the idiographic experiences of each participant as we meet them in turn – Shea, Ted and Mathew.

## **Chapter Four: Participant narratives – Shea, Ted and Mathew**

IPA, as a methodology, foregrounds the experiences of individuals. The previous chapter provided an overview of the process of IPA and stressed both the importance of individuals' voices and my own interpretation of the participants' experiences as the researcher. This chapter introduces the three participants and explores their individual experiences as they made decisions about their post-16 and post-18 education. Although all three participants have experienced both A level and BTEC teaching and assessment and are of the first generation in their families to enter HE, their individual stories of how they came to use a combination of qualifications to enter HE vary greatly, highlighting the idiographic nature of IPA. Each narrative considers the evidence for the themes drawn from the data for each participant before considering the overarching themes across the participants. Shea, Ted and Mathew have their own stories which each, in their own way, were keen to tell.

### **Shea's story**

Shea is a 20 year old white female from a working-class background. Shea is the first in her family to attend university. At school, Shea initially studied A levels in PE, psychology and biology but decided to stop studying biology after AS level. She then took a BTEC in PE so that she had sufficient UCAS points to go to university. Her BTEC teacher was on maternity leave for much of the year she spent studying it, returning when Shea had three months to complete the BTEC; no replacement teacher was found by the school to support Shea during that time. Shea went on to study a degree in one of the subjects she had previously studied.

Shea came to the university directly from her school's sixth form. Her family had a vocational background and no prior experience of HE. Whilst supporting Shea in her desire to go to university, her parents were limited in practical support they could provide. Shea's own desire to attend university

was long-term, surfacing well before GCSE examinations. Shea's GCSE grades were high enough to study what she wanted at A level, without any acknowledged barriers to decision-making.

Shea's interview highlights a number of themes. These are:

1. The importance of support to Shea and the impact this has on decisions about university;
2. Assessment preferences and their role in Shea's path to and through university;
3. Shea's privileging of A levels over BTEC (the academic/vocational divide).

### **The importance of support**

Shea's decisions about post-16 education appear to have followed the route of least resistance. She made the decision to attend the sixth form of the school she had attended from age 11:

So I just... went to the same school. I thought it was easier. I you kinda get, I think, in a normal school, you get that more support rather than a college which is kind of... it's less personal, I think [S, 45-46].

This quotation introduces her desire to maintain the levels of support she had received throughout her education. Throughout Shea's narrative, she acknowledged her preference for explicit support in her learning. Her decision of staying at school and entering sixth form was based on continued support, rather than what she perceived as the less supportive environment of a college.

Shea described her time through post-16 education and into university through the use of metaphors relating to a journey. This journey was single-minded, with a clear route: "I knew I was, like, going to uni. That was the only pathway I wanted to go." [S, 69]. Whilst this single route was a given to Shea, she acknowledged the change in expectations as she moved through her education, describing how she made her post-16 course decisions based on the "...next level in my pathway that I was gonna go" [S, 122-123]. The use of the word 'level' here suggests that Shea was aware of the increasing educational demands of HE. Perhaps to counteract these increasing

demands, Shea's decisions about a supportive university and familiar subject helped make her transition to HE as smooth as possible.

The familiarity of Shea's subjects at university, because of her A level and BTEC decisions, meant that she had the opportunity "to ease into gear" [S, 439] with her first assessments at HE level. Her careful planning of her passage into HE therefore led to a smooth journey with few bumps, despite lack of familial support with such a transition.

Recapping of content is a consistent feature of Shea's post-16 education; teaching of A level content involved significant recap sessions prior to new material being taught: "so each time we would go over the content from last lesson" [S, 144].

This recapping, as well as being key to embedding subject knowledge within the A level classes, formed one of the key academic skills actively developed by teachers on the A level courses Shea chose. As such, it supported the active process of preparing the A level students for the main form of assessment experienced in their A levels – examinations.

Throughout the interview, Shea contrasted her experiences of teaching, learning and assessment in A levels and in BTEC, especially in relation to teacher support. When discussing A levels, Shea spoke rapidly, repeating positive words such as "amazing" [S, 130, 133, 152, 229, 234, 428]. It is clear that the teaching and learning that she experienced during her A levels has had a significant impact on her. Shea stressed the support given to her and her cohort during their A levels, with teachers going "above and beyond, so they went above the curriculum that they wanted you to learn." [S, 228-229]. In addition to imparting subject knowledge, it appeared that a significant amount of time was spent reinforcing that learning: "...and that would take up half the lesson" [S, 142-143]; Shea felt that these recap sessions supported the embedding of the subject content in her memory, particularly in conjunction with the revision technique sessions provided by the A level tutors.

In stark contrast to Shea's A level experiences, her BTEC at the same school was devoid of support. Shea acknowledged that this was due to staffing shortages:

Well, the person who was in charge... who takes on the BTECs was on maternity leave but um... the person above her, so head of, well head of year I think it was said I could, I was \*able\* to do it, but in my own time. So... I wasn't going to do it in my own time, but I \*tried\* to but with A levels as well, I just focussed on those and then I kinda left the BTEC coursework kind of behind. [S, 31-35]

This abandonment of Shea to organise her own learning for a qualification unsurprisingly appeared to have had a significant impact both on her motivation at the time and on how she later reflected on the BTEC qualification. This is especially in contrast to how well supported she was in her A level qualifications. Her perception of the BTEC qualification will be explored in more detail in the final theme.

The desire for support consistently expressed by Shea throughout her discussion of her time in sixth form moulded her decisions about university:

I think, the course I chose and the reason why I came to [university] is cos it's a small cohort. So we've only got about... is it 15? It's under 20 people in my course, so for [course] and that's the same as my A level PE. I think... I prefer the... more support. [S, 321-324]

The support in Shea's A levels, which she sought to replicate in her HE experience, was both academic and pastoral. Academically, tutors were able to use the small cohort size to personalise support and provide "amazing" teaching experiences. Shea clearly made an informed decision on HE course, by closely matching prior educational experiences to future ones. When visiting universities as part of the application process, Shea visited one institution, well-regarded for her course: "I looked at that. The facilities looked \*really\* good but the cohort was massive, and I feel like it's less individual – it's not really people-centred." [S, 329-331]. Small cohort size, approachable staff and similar assessment methods were all considered as part of her methodical preparation for HE, and the study university was chosen because of its similarity to her sixth form experience:

So the teachers are there for you a lot, so if I am struggling with an assignment or presentation then I could easily get that support and that's what I wanted, really. It's like I like that relationship with teachers and the lecturers. Cos I was like that in sixth form [S, 324-327].

As well as continuity of support and small cohort teaching and learning experiences, Shea sought continuity of subject matter: "the courses I took for my sixth form, ... are literally the modules that I'm doing now. Like every single one. I couldn't have picked better for this course really" [S, 5-52]. Shea noted that because of this close relationship between subjects at sixth form and at university the first year of her degree "was kind of more of a recap" [S, 260-261] of content rather than new knowledge being developed. However, this was appreciated by Shea as a "nice introduction" and a "nice recap" [S, 263-264] of material whilst settling into the new environment.

The repetition throughout the interview of Shea's need for support, both from teachers and academics and through the familiarity of subject, indicate that this was a key factor determining her academic career to date. Without familial knowledge to support her decision-making about university, she had to consider the most important factors to aid her transition to the new environment of university. Her decision-making was based on a clear understanding of her own learning needs and strengths, and, for Shea, this has been a success, with such a close fit between the academic subjects and small-group support experienced in school and then in university that she was able to remain in a similar comfort zone to her school experiences. Careful consideration has clearly led to a successful transition for Shea.

### **Assessment preferences and their role in Shea's path to and through university**

Another area where Shea has actively considered her university course applications in order to support her transition to HE is assessment. Shea's A levels were primarily assessed through examination, and the school appears to have heavily reinforced examination technique preparation to support students in their end of course assessments. When asked whether this skill has supported her learning, Shea was emphatic: "Definitely. A levels have helped me loads. Cos they did a lot of classes on it as well, like what's

the best revision technique for you.” [S, 187-188]. The academic skills developed in revision and examination technique at school initially appear to have supported her study and assessment at university: “And that really helps with my course now. I did a test yesterday, actually. Um, for research methods. Um, again I used the same techniques that I learnt from A level.” [S, 194-196]. However, it is debatable as to whether the techniques used in her A levels are transferrable to forms of examination other than the style of questions used in her A levels. The interview gave her an opportunity to reflect on how the skills developed in A level classes have actually supported her in university:

Um, for the long answers... for the more, kind of, where you actually have to \*think\* about the answer, I did well. But the multiple choice was \*so\* difficult... it was really... I thought that was going to be easy because you think ooh, you can just tick it but [gasps] it was really difficult. The uh multiple choice. But again, it's quite funny, because I've had so much um... kind of experience of long answer questions with my psychology and my PE, I think I would have done better in that anyway because I'm not used to multiple choice. [S, 198-203]

In Shea's case, at least then, the skills she was drilled in to support her preparation for A level assessment have had a limited transferability to assessments by examination experienced in HE. That is not to say that her study at university has been impeded by such skills but her taken-for-granted assumption that her A level preparation was of unequivocal use throughout her degree does begin to be challenged, as she started to reflect on her experiences.

In contrast, the academic skills developed in Shea's BTEC were minimised initially. Whilst she repeatedly acknowledged the introduction of the academic skill of referencing in her BTEC, she qualified this as of a lower level than she used in university:

So, I think, say if BTEC was like a level one, cos it wasn't really proper... I just put in someone's name into Word, you know that little referencing button. It wasn't really proper referencing – it just kind of introduced me to it. It was like a... a toe in the water, kind of thing. Whereas when I'm in uni, well, now I'm in university my academic skills, my references, it's improved vastly” [S, 360-364].

This suggests Shea minimised the level of skills developed from her BTEC experience.

Like the hierarchy in referencing skills noted above, Shea appeared to separate out understanding gained through preparing for examination in A levels from understanding gained through assessed coursework in BTEC, with understanding gained through A levels being classed by Shea as superior. She identified that in her BTEC she “just” knew the information after having researched it, whereas she identifies the evaluative process that she was taught to undergo as part of the training she received for successful A level assessment:

It was just, I knew it. So I did it, I got it off the internet, or a book, wrote about it, and then I never actually thought about, I never evaluated it, like I didn't have higher thinking skills. Whereas with A levels, I'd actually understand it, I could evaluate it, I could justify it. [S, 400-403]

However, Shea did not appear to reflect on the fact that she was completing her BTEC in the second year of her time at sixth form, when she had already been studying the subject for A level for over a year. This previously gained knowledge on the subject may have significantly helped her in ‘just’ understanding the theory of the subject in BTEC, rather than it being something that she “never actually thought about” [S, 401] because it was easier. The categorisation by Shea of BTECs as easy compared to A levels may also be in part due to the ways in which each qualification is assessed.

Shea tended to perceive of assessment through examination as the most robust way of assessing learning, and talked approvingly of the recent addition of examinations into BTEC assessment:

However, I would say now they've had an element of examination, so they've put an examination element within it, I think it might increase that, kind of,... skill base of actually knowing what you've been taught. Which I think's better. [S, 404-407]

There is therefore privileging of the academic skills imparted as part of A levels over those taught explicitly or implicitly as part of BTEC. As the interview progressed, Shea did begin to acknowledge that her BTEC qualification may have supported the development of her academic writing

skills: “It was even good for academic writing really, because I did do more, kind of written-based documents, more assignment-based work” [S, 244-245]. However, perhaps because the development of these skills was implicit, through doing the assessment, rather than being taught how to do them, their influence was initially minimised in Shea’s mind. Similarly, when discussing assessment at university, it tended to be assessment through examination that was discussed. Whilst she did mention written assignments in her university experience, Shea reduced this aspect of assessment, again prioritising the more ‘academic’ assessment of examination.

Shea acknowledged that it was her positive experience with school both spending time recapping on subject content and their specific preparations for revision and examination technique that influenced her preferences in assessment:

I mean, I don’t \*enjoy\* them – I’m not one of them people like “wooh, exams!” but usually I do better in exams compared to assignments or written-based work. And I think that’s because of... A levels that I did in sixth form. [S, 422-425].

Her preference for examinations, developed during A level study, reinforced her perception of them as academic, as opposed to what she considered the less challenging assessment through coursework she experienced for her BTEC. This dichotomy, between what Shea saw as the academic rigour of A levels and the straightforwardness of BTEC, and how she located herself within this dichotomy, is the next theme in Shea’s data.

### **Shea’s privileging of A levels over BTEC (the academic/vocational divide)**

It must be acknowledged that Shea’s BTEC experience was unusual and apparently poorly organised by her tutors in that she was effectively left to complete the year-long course in her own time, until the return of the BTEC tutor three months before final submission. This will obviously affect her perceptions of the process of undertaking the BTEC. Based on this negative experience, her initial discussion of her BTEC was limited to its negative points. Later on, after the opportunity to reflect that the interview gave her, she acknowledged that the BTEC experience did provide her with some

academic skills which have supported her in her transition to HE: “It was a lot of referencing and you know here ... about,... er, referencing and writing academically, it was a lot... that was the first time, in sixth form, that I was, I even knew about referencing.” [S, 163-165]. Nevertheless, it remained a lesser experience compared to her A levels: “A levels are harder, and better in the way you’ve got to study... and understand the content” [S, 388-389].

Shea further reinforced the perception of learning in a BTEC context as a number of hurdles to jump over through repeated comments on the transient nature of learning, such as: “I just think, well, when I did it was very much like get the grade and you’re done.” [S, 224-225], “BTECs were just kind of you do the work and that’s it.” [S, 382-383] and “it was about doing it, getting the grade and you’re done” [S, 484]. This viewpoint of the qualification was implicitly supported by the school as an institution. A BTEC National Certificate is designed to be studied and assessed over a period of one academic year and whilst, nominally, Shea had that time available, in reality the school provided no support until the qualification tutor returned from parental leave, three months before final submission date:

And then when she came back, it was like three months until the end of the year and she said ‘have you done anything’ and I was like ‘no’ and I had about... How many did I have... about six to eight different... like units I had to complete. And I was put down for a distinction star [laughs]. So I had to get them all to that level! Yes, it was a lot of work. [S, 35-39].

Whilst it is clear from staff expectation of her achievements that Shea was an able student, the fact that the school expected her to study for the qualification in her own time implies that school perceptions of the qualification were that it was of a less academic form, requiring limited to no support for the student for much of the process. It is unsurprising that this attitude was absorbed by Shea.

The use of language by Shea as well as the speed and fluency with which she talked as she referred to the different qualifications is interesting. For example, when discussing A levels, she spoke rapidly and with enthusiasm, often repeating key words such as “amazing” [S, 130, 133, 152, 229, 234, 428]. In contrast, her consideration of BTEC was prompted through its

otherness to A levels, particularly in relation to assessment: “Well, I thought... because they’re so different, as BTECS, when I did them, didn’t have any examinations” [S, 223-224]. Rather than the confident, rapid, repetitive and extensive way of talking when she discussed A level teaching, learning and assessment, Shea often only spoke about her BTEC experiences when prompted, or when contrasting it with her positive experiences of A levels. In addition, she spoke less fluently, and with less enthusiasm evident in her voice. Both Shea’s words and way of speaking illustrated her perceptions of her qualifications and what they meant to her.

Furthermore, when asked to expand on her assertion that A levels were harder than BTEC qualifications (“But I would still say, A levels are harder”, [S, 387]), Shea referred to how both A level students and BTEC students would answer questions on subject content. When referring to A level students, she used the inclusive pronoun ‘we’: “I think, in my opinion would \*know\*, cos we’ve been kind of taught the content, we’ve got to learn the content and you’re going to get asked questions on the content.” [S, 393-395]. Yet when discussing the understanding of a BTEC student, she referred to such students as the exclusive pronoun ‘they’, thus excluding herself from this group:

Whereas if you ask a BTEC student, they’ve done work on it but a lot of students kind of search it, kind of put it in their own words, and that’s it, and it’s been marked and they don’t think about it again. [S, 395-397]

Shea’s othering (Brons, 2015) of her BTEC qualification may, in part, relate to her initial period as a student taking solely A levels. It was only after one year that her plans changed to include the BTEC and remove biology A level. It almost appears as though her initial view of herself as an A level student was maintained after the change to a combination of both A level and BTEC. Rather than consider herself a “BTEC Barry” [S, 377], Shea, perhaps unconsciously, limited both her discussion of her BTEC experience and the skills developed within it.

Initially, as with many of her thoughts about her BTEC experiences, Shea was quite dismissive of the skills she developed. However, as the interview

develops, she started to reflect on how the skills she dismissed within her BTEC as “do it yourself” (S, 153, 272, 315) and “do it and you’re done” [S, 225], had supported her in aspects of her transition to HE. For example, she paused, about to provide an example of how A levels supported her academic transition to university, before instead acknowledging that her BTEC coursework provided a taste of the type of independent study needed in her degree:

Yeah, I think so, so again, I think A level was good for [long pause]... Then again, you could say, for BTEC, that was good for the independent study, because it was a lot of ‘here’s your assignment do it yourself’ kind of thing. So that was quite good independent-wise which could be transferred to what I do now in in, um, my course. [S, 313-316]

It appears that only through reflection after the event did Shea start to consider the relevance of her BTEC qualification, thus beginning to break down the barrier she seemed to have put in place in relation to her BTEC experiences.

Nevertheless, whilst the interview did give Shea the opportunity to reflect on the usefulness of her qualifications in the transition to university, it was clear that she still considered the A levels she undertook to be more rigorous and ‘academic’. Shea discussed her friend in sixth form, who took only BTEC qualifications, and chose to attend a university where the course has no assessment by examination. Both Shea and her friend appear to have made active decisions about HEI and course, based at least in part on forms of assessment. Shea assumed, however, that because there are no examinations in her friend’s course, that it must, therefore be a more practical, vocational degree: “So it’s worked out for her, and she’s more of a practical person anyway.” [S, 418]. Shea’s views on coursework being more related to practical education accords with her privileging of academic over vocational knowledge.

Throughout the interview, Shea highlighted her preference for what she called the academic form of education. Firstly, she contrasted herself with her family: “I’m more of an academic erm, kind of person compared to they’re more kind of practical, hands on” [S, 64-65]. Having enjoyed the theory-

based A level teaching she experienced, Shea justified her decision to study at university over an apprenticeship: “I wanted that academic side and I feel that with university you get more, you get more elements” [S, 78-79]. When questioned about her enjoyment of the theory side of her learning, Shea once again appeared to conflate theory and academic knowledge with assessment through examination:

I: And you said you enjoy the theory...

S: Yeah, I do. Well, to be honest, one of my favourite things is exams. [S, 421-422]

To Shea, then, there was a clear divide between the academic nature of A level and university study and assessment, as exemplified by assessment through examination, and the vocational training and coursework-based assessment provided by an apprenticeship or by her BTEC.

Coming from a vocational family, where employment was the traditional route after school, Shea is carving an alternative route, through attending university. Because of the limited experience of HE within her family, she tried to reinforce her own academic skills and experience, contrasting them to practical and vocational education. In doing this, she almost others her own experiences of her BTEC. Shea made an active decision about which HEI to apply to, based on what mattered most to her – familiarity of subject content, a clear link to her desired career and evidence of support that mirrored her experiences in sixth form. Through this considered decision, Shea appeared to be thriving in the academic world she sought to enter.

### **Ted's story**

Ted is a 21 year old white male from a working-class background. Ted is first generation to go to university, with his brother having attended the case study university. Ted initially studied A levels in ICT and design and technology and a BTEC in engineering at school, after not being permitted to study A level sciences due to a C in GCSE maths. Ted had to leave school after doing poorly in assessments at the end of year 12. He enrolled on a science-based BTEC extended diploma at a local college, and went

on to study a related topic at university. Ted was diagnosed with ADHD part way through his BTEC course.

Ted's journey to university was one of dichotomies, pitching gatekeeping against inclusivity, abandonment against support, and failure against success. Four key themes will be explored within this narrative. The four themes are:

1. agency in educational decisions;
2. the impact of assessment on Ted's experiences;
3. The role of support;
4. From failure to validation.

Each theme will be explored in turn.

### **Agency in Ted's educational decisions**

This theme explores how Ted made decisions through his post-16 education, and the level of agency he had within those decisions. It considers the role of structural gatekeeping in Ted's decisions, and how Ted, as a first-generation student, decided on university.

At 16, Ted had a clear plan of what he wanted to study post-GCSE, and that this would lead on to study at university. Initially choosing to study science A levels (biology and chemistry), a grade C in his mathematics GCSE put paid to his plan: "But I wasn't allowed to do that. Because I had a C in maths. It was deemed that I was not smart enough to do science at A levels. Because I had a C in maths." [T, 24-25]. Ted's continued anger over not gaining the required grade for studying science A levels at sixth form was clear from his voice, and the repetition of "because I had a grade C in maths". The school appears to act as gatekeeper in this situation. Ted's use of the passive terms "I wasn't allowed" and "it was deemed" [T, 23] demonstrates his disconnect from the decision-making process about his post-16 education. Rather than making active decisions about his future education, he was blocked. Rather than becoming a science A level student, he was given alternatives: A levels in ICT and design and technology and a BTEC certificate in engineering. The

school did not suggest alternative providers who might have been able to cater to Ted's interest. Unsurprisingly, Ted reacted badly to his loss of agency in his post-16 educational decisions:

I wasn't happy, I was angry. Yeah. I was like, I was a bit raging, like. I got me mum to come with me to the school and speak to the principal to see if there was anything I could do and she basically said no, because that was just their policy. [T, 117-119]

Ted relied on his mother as advocate, although she herself had limited academic capital, having left school at 16. As such, there was little chance of the school altering its decision and making an exception for Ted. Ted talked with anger at this closing off of avenues, and at the apparent failure of justice and loss of opportunity, not just for himself but others, too:

But there are people like that that I know who are working in them jobs [McDonalds and shop work] who have a lot more potential, you know. Who could be working, perhaps, in, I don't know, maybe gone to university if they were allowed to do A levels if they wanted to. It's because of one stupid exam when they're 16. [T, 122-125]

Even three years later, the anger and despair at the apparent ending of Ted's educational aspirations, as well as the aspirations of others, was clear in Ted's voice.

The gatekeeping of A level entry by the school forced Ted to take qualifications that were, at best, only liminally related to his interest. Unsurprisingly, Ted had little enthusiasm for these imposed substitutions, and he openly talked about his disengagement and how this affected his behaviour at school post-16. In his lessons for AS level ICT, a qualification unrelated to his initial desire to study biology and chemistry, Ted's lack of interest, as well as at that time undiagnosed ADHD, led to frustration between him and the teacher, in a vicious circle of frustrated behaviour and unmet support needs:

Like I would try to, you know, ask for help. Not ask for help, well, I don't know what to say here to try to make myself look a goody boy because I was a little, a little mess about. So it was fair that she'd [Ted's teacher] get frustrated with me. Because of that I just never really wanted to do any work and I wasn't really interested. Because, like she never wanted to come down and sit

and help me do it because I didn't understand the stuff. So then I'd get it wrong and she'd shout at me, you know. [T, 181-187]

With hindsight, Ted acknowledged that his behavioural issues affected the support provided by the teacher; however, the behavioural issues appear to have been exacerbated by lack of agency in post-16 decisions, and little interest in the subjects apparently imposed upon him.

That is not to say that all of Ted's post-16 education at school was considered a battle. He acknowledged that he found the more practical qualifications of greater interest:

And then, um, the technology... It was OK; it was like a lot of practical stuff I had to do there. It was... I didn't particularly not enjoy that one so much, it was just it wasn't something I wanted to do. It was like construction, so I had like building a table and it was like... it wasn't like... I enjoyed doing it. It was practical, it was practical. I'd rather do that than sitting at a desk and read, like. [T, 197-202]

Ted, as a student, preferred a more active form of learning involving practical work and application of knowledge, although his use of a double negative implies that he was not necessarily fully engaged with his more practical technology course; rather than clearly stating his enjoyment of the practical elements, his interest is muted: "I didn't particularly not enjoy that one so much" [T, 199]. Furthermore, he once again drew on his desire to study A level sciences, arguing that he believed that both chemistry and biology have "a lot of practicals" [T, 204], thus suggesting that he would have been capable of studying A level sciences, if given the opportunity by the gatekeeping school.

Lack of engagement with the alternative qualifications in the school sixth form led to Ted failing his AS levels: "I didn't do well in it because I didn't want to do it, you know" [T, 211-212]. There appears to have been little school support for Ted's disengagement and consequent failure. Indeed, Ted asserted that, when looking for alternative education after his failed AS levels, there was "...no support from like my school or anything like that." [T, 75-76]. Instead, Ted had to rely on his family to help him navigate alternative qualifications. After failing his AS levels at school, Ted was ready to give up: "So then I thought, um.... I'm just gonna get a job then but then spoke to my

mum. She's always said to me all my life, not to waste my brain." [T, 44-45]. His mum failed to get into nursing after "a stupid mistake when she was 16" [T, 152] and wanted both of her sons to have the academic opportunities denied to her. Ted and his mum went to visit the regional college, where Ted was introduced to the BTEC Diploma and the supportive environment of the college. Ted's decision about attending the college appears more due to familial support than rational decision-making but the change in environment from school to college helped his academic development. Whilst initially the BTEC course was not plain sailing, as "Actually, the first year I went there, you know, I didn't do any work" [T, 54-55], the experienced FE tutor advised Ted to be tested for specific learning differences, where he was diagnosed with ADHD. Support was then put in place to allow Ted to thrive in the college environment, and in the BTEC qualification. This support allowed him the opportunity to apply for university.

Although Ted stated that attending university was one of his goals, his experience of HE was limited; he was a first-generation university student. Most of Ted's knowledge about university itself came from his older brother's experiences, supplemented by his BTEC tutor's advice. Ted's decision of applying to the university seems primarily to have been made based on his own experience of a trip to the study university, whilst visiting his brother there.

I wanted to come to this one specifically, cos I'd been, I'd been over here while I was in college. [...] I knew this place a bit and I was like, you know, my brother was here and I thought 'I wanna go to [university], so. [T, 159-164]

The lack of wider knowledge of other universities was indicated by Ted's statement on alternatives to his first option, the case study university: "Yeah, but I said, if not, any other university is fine." [T, 165]. In reality, Ted had no other knowledge on which to base wider decision-making other than his brother's experiences, and so failure to get into the case study university would have been 'making do', supported by little knowledge or experience.

To summarise this first theme of agency in educational decisions, it appears that Ted's agency has been limited. Gatekeeping by the school at 16 led to

being enrolled onto courses in which Ted had no interest, with no alternative routes suggested to him. After failing because of his lack of interest in these courses, and having to leave school, familial support (albeit limited in educational capital) helped Ted to find an educational course and environment in which he felt supported and could succeed. The success of Ted's BTEC experience led to increased agency, in that he could then decide to apply for university. Whilst Ted succeeded in entering his first option of university, lack of familial habitus around HE meant that Ted's decision-making was limited to knowledge from his brother. Ted's agency in his education was still limited, but this time by lack of knowledge of the geography of HE.

Ted's increase in agency through his post-16 education is mirrored by the changes in teaching and learning he experienced. The increased agency in following his academic interests rather than those imposed by the school led Ted to develop his academic skills as he progressed from school to college and then to university. The second theme in Ted's narrative, assessment, explores this further.

### **The impact of assessment on Ted's educational journey**

The majority of summative assessment throughout Ted's time at school was through examination. However, despite Ted's reasonable GCSE results, he acknowledged that this method of assessment was difficult for him: "So it's just pure exams and I just did not do well in that situation." [T, 29-30]. However, Ted did also acknowledge that there was some coursework in his post-16 school qualifications, but he was not motivated to work hard on this: "I didn't even hand in half the coursework for the ICT because I just wasn't interested in it, one bit in it" [T, 36-37]. Ted's perception of examinations and his initial statement that his AS levels were solely assessed by examination, even though he later acknowledged the presence of coursework, may be retrospectively coloured by the gatekeeping actions of his school, when he did not gain the required B grade in mathematics in order to study science A levels. His GCSE results were mixed, and in primary school he passed the examinations for entry into grammar school, which he subsequently attended, in spite of his teacher's predictions of failure.

Therefore, whilst Ted's feelings towards examinations as a form of assessment are negative, his actual performance appears more positive. Negative experiences of this form of assessment clouded his perception and attitude towards examinations.

In contrast to assessment primarily by examination in school, Ted's BTEC experience in college was more positive. Here, it was "no exams, all coursework based" [T, 54]. Assessment through coursework, such as a research project, was described by Ted as "...really, really fun" [T, 94]. Ted aligned himself with the views of his BTEC tutor, that the skills involved in practical work and coursework are 'better' ways of preparing for HE: "He says that the way A levels do it, it doesn't teach anything. I agree with him." [T, 109-110]. Ted here was reinforcing his perceptions of examinations as being poor preparation for HE: "Like it's [A levels] all just books and all exams" [T, 111]. This statement is at odds with a later statement Ted made when justifying why he should have been allowed to take A level sciences at sixth form: "But there was a lot of practicals in the A level science, like biology" [T, 204]. Ted moved from justifying his argument that A levels are poor preparation for HE as they are too heavily based on examination, to stressing that he would have been able to study A levels if he had been given the opportunity, because of the practical elements. This suggests that Ted had not yet reconciled himself to being prevented from studying A levels sciences at sixth form.

Ted's lack of acceptance of his rejection from A level sciences in sixth form may have led him to solidify his post-hoc rationalisation of how the BTEC qualification has supported his transition to university. His initial views of BTECs, before enrolling on his course were rather negative: "But, you know, 5 to 6 years ago, I thought someone doing a BTEC was stupid but now I think someone doing BTEC is just as smart as someone doing A levels." [T, 294-296]. This view may have informed Ted's initial desire to do A levels – the alternative to him at that time was for 'stupid' people, a label against which Ted fought for much of his earlier academic career. However, after completing the BTEC, Ted demonstrated the zeal of the converted. Initially, upon transition to HE, Ted was surprised at how well he felt the BTEC had

prepared him for studying at university: “I was like so shocked, like, I... I could never, ever have thought that this BTEC I did was going to be that useful for me.” [T, 85-86]. Whilst much of Ted’s shock at the ease of transitioning to university study relates to subject specific skills, he also noted the similarity of teaching, learning and assessment strategies between college and university: “And it’s like, now, now I just tell everybody that if, if you wanna do science, you should go to college and do the level 3 extended diploma. Because it is pretty much like what university is.” [T, 102-104]. He also implied that those students on his course who have not gone through the BTEC route struggled with some of the skills required within the degree course: “I could do a lot of things that a lot of people in my class who did A levels just couldn’t.” [T, 87-88].

Although Ted was assessed through examinations at university as well as coursework, he tended to minimise this aspect of assessment; instead, he stressed the similarities between his BTEC and his degree: “But, it’s prepared me in the fact that the assignments are very, very, very similar. Layout, very similar layout.” [T, 226-227]. Ted argued that his BTEC tutor at college provided support in gaining academic skills as well as subject specific knowledge: “And um, he just showed me how to write stuff properly, and how to, like, lay stuff out.” [T, 233]. Ted’s labelling of such academic skills in this way again suggests that he may have still been struggling with feelings of lack of achievement at school, which meant that he believes he had to relearn basic skills.

Overall, it is clear from Ted’s narrative that assessment at school was a negative experience, whereas the range of methods of assessment at college had better suited him. The transition to HE was aided by Ted’s familiarity with the forms of assessment used there, and the support provided by his BTEC course tutor in preparing him for university-based assessment. This links to the next theme evident in Ted’s narrative – that of support.

## **Experiences of support**

Ted's education to date is characterised by support – both the presence and absence of it. Ted clearly delineated between his experiences of support at school and at college. It appeared to become a less important factor at university as Ted continued to develop the independent learning skills he started learning at college.

Ted's time at school after his GCSEs was characterised, to his mind, by a lack of support. This started with the refusal of the school head to make allowances to A level acceptance policy, to allow him to take science A levels without a grade B in GCSE mathematics. Purportedly the school then supported Ted to make alternative decisions for qualifications within the school sixth form, although this may not have been the best option for him with regard to both subjects and preferred ways of learning. The lack of effective support continued during Ted's time in sixth form, with an apparently hostile learning relationship with at least one of the teachers, although Ted admitted his own role in this, in part due to lack of interest in the subjects: "So it was like a research paper but like I didn't do well in it because I didn't want to do it, you know. That's my issue, so..." [T, 210-211].

Ted immediately contrasted the perceived lack of support at school with the support provided at college: "But then there were some teachers like who I got on very well with and who'd help me. It was like... my tutor in college, he would sit down with me." [T, 187-189]. Ted's college tutor became a source of academic capital for Ted, supporting him in his UCAS application, as well as providing academic skills support: "He knows how it all works, how university works. So he taught me how he learnt at university." [T, 229-230]. The development of academic capital support that was lacking within the habitus of Ted's home was supported by the tutor, going over and above his responsibilities, to support Ted:

Like when I was doing my, um, my UCAS, he sat down with me, like, multiple times, on multiple creations and went through my personal statement and told me what to do to fix it and make it better. And like even out of hours times, like after class he was staying behind with me to help me do it. [T, 189-191].

The support provided by Ted's college tutor appears to have stood him in good stead in terms of Ted's transition to HE:

...they were helping me and er like they helped me with, like, blocking out my time for revision, and like with coursework and not to do that but do this, this and this and that helped me do it. And just the act of that, like now I would sit and do that in my head, you know? But I never learnt to do that from school.

[T, 403-406]

Throughout these discussions, Ted contrasted the supportive environment and tutor at college with the lack of such support in his school – another example of the dichotomies within Ted's experiences.

Ted said little specifically about support within the HE environment, apart from where he contrasted the supportive environment around extensions for assessments in both college and university, with the once more unsupportive school environment:

But the college were very... alright with it. And they gave me extensions and like if you're not well, we'll give you another three days on it, or whatever. But I never got that at school. And here at university, it's the same thing; they would do that for me, they would give me extensions. They've given me extensions and deferrals for assignments that I haven't done because I've been ill. [T, 248-252].

The use of extensions and deferrals implies that Ted was familiar with the support available within the university environment, and that he valued it as he did the support in college.

Whilst Ted's time at college, and the supportive environment there, appear to have equipped him well for most areas of academic skills at university, one area where he struggled was the predominant form of tutor contact at university – the lecture: "Um, to be honest, I know it sounds really bad but... there's just not a whole lot of point me going to lectures, because I don't remember one bit from them, you know?" [T, 381-383]. Ted freely admitted that he struggles in the lecture environment, in part due to his diagnosis of ADHD. Nevertheless, he used the skills of independent study developed during his BTEC to overcome this learning issue: "I have to learn myself, yeah. They [lectures] don't help me one bit at all so I have to learn it

myself anyways” [T, 386-387]. Ted directly attributed his ability to work independently to it being a major part of his time at college: “because I’ve had to do it. For so long.” [T, 280]. That is not to say that working independently at college was due to a lack of support – Ted was clear that it was the support available at college that enabled his independent study at university.

The theme of support is therefore, again, one of strong dichotomies for Ted, with little support at school at contrast with the support provided by his tutor at college, which put him in a positive position for independent study at university. The presence of a strong dichotomy of experiences continues into the final theme.

### **From failure to validation**

For Ted, his story was a tale that had to be told. The emotions of the previous years of education, particularly the anger and humiliation of his time at school, were clear throughout his interview. However, this was balanced by the confidence he developed within the college environment, allowing him to progress to university. Castigated as someone who would not succeed in education, he was proud of his progress but still angry at the barriers placed in his way on his route to university.

Throughout Ted’s interview, he frequently mentioned failure. This might be the actual failure of an examination, or the teachers’ perceptions that he would fail. For example, Ted highlighted an experience in primary school, when he explained that he was repeatedly told that he would fail the 11+ examination for entry into grammar school:

Well, I did the eleven plus and for the whole three months running up to it, you know, I was always told, I’m gonna fail it, I’m gonna fail it, and that’s it, I’m gonna fail. Like my teacher you know, said all my class papers were all Ds, were all fails and it was like, he, he can’t go to the grammar school, cos he’s going to fail this. And I got an A! [T, 131-134].

In response to the repeated comments that he was going to fail his 11 plus, Ted instead fought against this prediction: “Told I’m not for the grammar school, that I’m not smart enough. I, I wasn’t having it.” [T, 138]. It is

unsurprising, then, that Ted reacted in an angry way to being told that he could not attempt A level sciences in his sixth form: “I wasn’t happy, I was angry. Yeah. I was like, I was a bit raging, like.” [T, 117]. Rather than being allowed to prove his ability, like he had been able to at 11, school policies on sixth form entry qualifications ended his dream to study A level sciences.

Ted worked throughout the interview to stress his intelligence, perhaps as a mechanism to distance himself from others’ views of his academic ability within the school environment. For example, when asked about what he had studied in sixth form, he started by saying what he wanted to do (A level sciences), rather than what he actually studied. Ted admitted to previously believing that the BTEC qualification was for those who were not intelligent enough to take A levels.

He then went on to explain that he was prevented from this route because of a C in mathematics GCSE: “although I tried my best, to the best of my ability and I, I’m not a stupid person, so like C wasn’t really a good reflection of what my ability is, for maths” [T, 26-28]. Later, when discussing what to do after failing his AS levels and BTEC in sixth form, he stressed his mum’s words: “she’s saying to me don’t waste your life, in that I have a brain” [T, 154].

However, Ted was vindicated by his acceptance onto his university course after completing his BTEC: “And it just shows you, doesn’t it, like. That I wasn’t smart enough to do science at A levels, but I’m now at university doing [science-based degree].” [T, 69-70]. Indeed, Ted appeared to have turned to proselytising about BTEC qualifications as a route into science at university: “That’s what I tell everyone, that: Don’t do A levels, don’t do A levels.” [T, 314-315]. In his part-time holiday job back home, Ted acted as an informal careers adviser to acquaintances in a similar position to his own when he failed to get onto the science A levels he was aiming for:

So then I said, ‘well, don’t worry about it because...’ and then I said ‘just go to [FE college] and speak to them about applied science because I did that and now I’m going to university, and I was deemed not smart enough to do A levels myself... so... [T, 321-324].

Within a few years, having experienced the transformative effect of a qualification which had an assessment process aligned with his preferences, and a supportive tutor, Ted moved from considering BTEC qualifications as for “stupid” [T, 295] people, to actively evangelising about his experiences and encouraging others to take that route.

Nevertheless, despite Ted’s recurring assertions of the superiority of BTECs for entry into his science-based degree, his continued anger at the school’s refusal to allow him onto the A level science course, and his return to the topic of his C grade in mathematics suggested that he still had not fully come to terms with his educational route. For example, this quote from near the end of the interview shows how he still tried to juggle his grades in his head to justify being allowed to study A levels at sixth form:

I’m just happy now that like I’m at university and that I can actually say, oh, actually, I don’t need a C in maths or a B in maths. You know what I mean? That was literally all it was, because I got a C in maths. That was the only thing that stopped me. Yeah. Maybe if I had got a double B in double science, like... But I got a BC so maybe I... maybe they might have let me in if I’d got a BB with the C in maths, you know if I got a double B but... [T, 438-442]

Therefore, whilst Ted has successfully made the academic transition to HE and ostensibly typifies the success of BTECs as an alternative means of accessing HE, there appeared to be some part of him that still yearned for the opportunity to enter HE through the traditional route of A levels. For Ted, this appeared to remain a source of loss and anger.

### **Mathew’s story**

Mathew is a 24 year old white male from a working-class background. He initially studied four STEM-based A levels, dropping to three after AS levels. After doing less well than he had hoped in his A levels, Mathew then decided to study a BTEC in an IT-related subject. After this, he worked in a business for two years, before entering university to study a business-related degree. After one year of this degree, he changed course to a degree in the same faculty but with a different focus.

Mathew comes from an army family, having moved around extensively prior to secondary education. Mathew's journey into HE is long, with circumstances leading to changes in plan before finally settling into his current undergraduate course at the university. There are three themes present in Mathew's story. These are:

1. Applying for university;
2. The impact of assessment on Mathew's decision-making;
3. How prior experiences prepared Mathew for studying at university.

Each of these themes will be explored in turn.

### **Decisions on applying for university**

Mathew's family does not have a history of attending HE and he was the first in his family to apply for and go to university. Other family members have studied to level three but have not moved into HE: "...in, in terms of qualification-wise, my family's highest qualification would be A level and college, er, BTEC." [M, 49-50]. Nevertheless, Mathew's achievement at GCSE, with 11 GCSEs at grade C or above, was significant and meant that there were no academic limitations on his post-16 education options. Mathew chose to study primarily traditional 'academic' A levels at his school: "I stayed at the same high school to do the A levels, where I took, um, physics, chemistry, IT and maths. Um, at the end of the first year, AS level, I dropped the maths and continued with physics, chemistry and IT." [M, 20-22]. Mathew's A level subjects, therefore, allowed entry onto a wide number of science-based degree courses, subject to suitable grades being met.

However, going to university was not a long term wish of Mathew's: "It wasn't really always on the plan." [M, 49]. Rather, it appears as though pressure from school encouraged him to consider this route: "...they all like... the kind of way they wanted us, the students, to go was to go straight to university. So at that point, I did, um, apply for university" [M, 27-29]. Mathew appeared therefore to comply with the expectations of school initially and applied for a number of universities, including Russell Group universities. However, Mathew's ambivalence towards university study was highlighted by his commenting that he applied later than the initial UCAS deadline of January: "I

sent the application off for around March, because I wasn't sure exactly **when** I was going to go to university" [M, 32-33]. Mathew's uncertainty over HE was highlighted both by the late application and his indecision over when he would go. The stressing of "when" in the interview extract above suggested that school pressure had encouraged him to consider HE but that he might rather consider it on his own terms and in his own time rather than following their timetable for entry straight after A levels.

Although Mathew was uncertain about his post-A level route, his school appeared to have a clear idea of progression for its students. Progression after sixth form, Mathew highlighted, demonstrates an academic and vocational divide. As he said,

In my school year ... I can't account for everybody but I wanna say at least 10 people went to BTEC and the rest all went to A level. And everyone from the A level all went to university, whereas the people from BTEC went to work, and to apprenticeships, and just full-time work rather than university [M, 234-237].

It is not surprising that in this environment, Mathew felt 'pushed' to apply for HE, as there appeared to be little alternative for an A level student at the school. Also of interest was the clear message from the school that BTEC qualifications were a route to vocational employment and training rather than also an alternative route into HE.

Encouraged by the school to apply for HE, Mathew was ready to move away from the family home to study. However, a change in family circumstances led to him withdrawing firstly all of his UCAS applications except for the local university, then finally withdrawing that application as well: "I withdrew all of my applications from anywhere that was far, so [lists universities]. I just, no. I just turned around and said no." [M, 153-154]. Mathew appeared to accept this change in plans with little disappointment. Whilst it is a number of years since this occurred and he may have come to terms with any disappointment, he talked matter-of-factly about withdrawing his applications. It may be that pressure from school to apply, rather than internal motivation, meant that withdrawing applications was not a major disappointment to him. In the end, whilst Mathew did pass all of his A levels, his grades were lower than he had hoped:

...the overall grade that I got was for chemistry I got a D, er physics I got an E and IT I got a D as well, so it was.... Like, as early on as from then I knew, like, that I wasn't great at taking exams" [M, 88-90].

With these results, he may not have been accepted for his first option of university if he had not withdrawn his applications.

Rather than looking for work immediately, Mathew made the decision to continue his education at the same academic level as A levels, by studying on a two-year BTEC Level 3 diploma at a local college. Mathew immediately identified the difference in ethos between the college and his school sixth form, in relation to attitudes to progression into HE:

And, um, when I, when I withdrew my application from then and went to, um, the college to do BTEC, there wasn't much emphasis. Like it was mentioned, oh yeah, let's do UCAS, let's go to university, but there was never any real push like you \*had\* to go and do that. Which I felt more relaxed in that environment. It was all a lot nicer. [M, 54-58].

From these comments, it is clear that Mathew felt pressured into applying to university in his school sixth form, and this supports the idea that he was not too concerned that he had to withdraw his initial UCAS applications. With no pressure to apply to university, Mathew enjoyed his BTEC course and chose to enter employment on completing his course, rather than go to university. Again, this was related to personal circumstances, but Mathew appeared to have no regret in going straight into employment rather than further study:

But when I came to the end of BTEC, um, I actually started to hate IT, so I, I didn't end up applying to continue doing IT and at that time, me and my partner was, we was moving in together so I naturally went into full time work so that we could afford our own place so... [M, 58-62].

After two years of studying computing, Mathew's interest in the subject waned. As this coincides again with a change in personal circumstances, the time was once more not right for Mathew to enter HE.

After several years in employment, however, Mathew decided to apply for university, in a subject area related to his employment. The time was now right for him to make the most of the university experience most relevant to him, something that he acknowledged:

Like, I remember one of my friends from high school went, it was very much, it was very much partying every weekend, enjoying the university lifestyle and, er, for me now, being a mature student, I know I'm here to learn, I'm here to get a degree. [M, 358-361].

As a mature applicant, Mathew knew what he wanted to get out of university. His comment above implies that, if he had gone through with his initial applications, it might have been him “partying every weekend” rather than making the most of the opportunity to study at this level. Having settled in the area, Mathew sought only to apply to the local university: “I was very much set on [university city] was my home and I want to stay in [university city], so I will apply to [the study university].” [M, 159-161]. Mathew appeared to have made his decisions on university based on convenience.

The theme of applying for university runs through Mathew's interview. The journey to university was, for him, by no means certain. Rather, initial pressure from school appeared to have done little to encourage him, with Mathew preferring the more relaxed environment of college. Even then, however, Mathew only made his mind to enter university when the time was right for him. This is after he had been employed for a few years and was confident of his interest in his course and his reasons for entering HE. Nevertheless, after one year at university, Mathew made the decision to change course. The reason for this change in programme was that of assessment – the next theme to be explored.

### **The impact of assessment on Mathew's decisions**

The methods of assessment used in his qualifications has had a considerable impact on Mathew's academic decisions. It is interesting to note that he had good GCSE grades at 16: “... all of those I got C and above. And for maths and English I got A and B respectively.... Um, 11 GCSEs in total.” [M, 5-8]. Whilst GCSEs at that time were assessed by both examination and coursework, examinations were the primary means of assessment for most GCSEs (Ofqual, 2013). Nevertheless, despite these good GCSE results, Mathew's interview was filled with his dislike of assessment by examination. This dislike has had a considerable impact on his decisions over his academic career. This theme therefore explores the impact of Mathew's assessment preferences on his study decisions.

Whilst Mathew did not explicitly discuss how the school supported his decision-making around post-16 education, there was the inference that with 11 GCSEs of grade C and above that an academic route was encouraged. Mathew appeared to have had no qualms about studying for A levels when he made his decisions at 16. It appears only after studying A levels and achieving, for him, disappointing A level grades of D, D, E, that he found examinations to be a form of assessment he struggled with. Mathew inferred that this was an early point in his academic career to discover that he found assessment through examination difficult. However, his good GCSE results suggest that it may not only be assessment by examination that might have affected his grades.

Mathew's perception of examinations and how they assess or fail to assess understanding and application is summed up in how he referred to assessment in his BTEC at college:

Um, and it was... you go, you go off, you do your own research to answer the particular question that you're given. it's not all 'right, we're going to teach you everything all year and at the end of the year you'll get graded on what you remember for this exam'. [M, 106-109].

Rather than perceiving assessment by examination as a means of measuring learning, Mathew dismissed it as little more than a memory test. Indeed, a memory test where the student appears to be a passive receptacle, taught at by teachers. This is in contrast to his perception of the active process of assessment within his BTEC, where he stressed the independence of learning.

Through his discussion of the similarities of BTEC assessment to university assessment, it was clear that the mechanics of assessment at university appear to be familiar to Mathew. He stressed the independence of learning at college as opposed to the teaching of A levels, which he described as "right, we're going to teach you everything all year" [M, 106-107]. This phrase implies a lack of agency in the learning experience for A levels. The lack of agency is further reinforced when Mathew described the examination period and revision process as he remembered it at school:

Up until the point where you had to revise for exams, I feel like the teachers, they basically... they... at A level the teachers just basically taught you 'this is going to be on the exam, we'll learn this, this is the syllabus, so that's what we're gonna do'. And it was only once we got to the exam season when we was doing our own revision that we really had our own power into what we would learn. But then again, when we was doing the revision, we were only going, for myself, I was only going over what the teachers were teaching me. I didn't delve into other subjects, or further reading of it, um, simply because I had the mentality of that's not what the teacher's told us so why would that be on the exam? [M, 329-336].

Mathew's view of learning for A level is that of someone disconnected from the learning process, being told what to learn, and discouraged from revising anything not on the teacher's list. Mathew's use of the word "power" [M, 332] reinforced his feeling of lack of control over his learning, only experiencing a moment of power over his education when it came to self-guided revision in the examination season.

It was clear from Mathew's interview that he contrasted his positive experiences of learning during his BTEC at college with his negative experiences at school, studying A levels. To a certain extent, this is to be expected, in view of his disappointing A level results. As Mathew says,

Because I, I think, in all honesty, my opinion is that BTEC is better than A level. But that's like down to my, my learning methods and how I'm assessed. [M, 242-244].

Mathew suggested that the BTEC qualification had given him the opportunity to more truly demonstrate his academic abilities, whereas he felt limited by assessment through examination.

Assessment type did not appear to affect Mathew's initial decision over university course; rather, his previous job role moulded his decision. However, he made the significant decision to change course after the first year at university, apparently based on the methods of assessment used in his initial course:

And got in, and I was doing a year of that and then it came to um, May/June exams and I realised that the majority of the course was, 75% of it was all based on exams. Now I, my particular learning style and... technique, I don't thrive well on exams and, well, I'm a lot better at written work, of assignment and projects,

that kind of stuff? Um, so once I had completed the first year, and got my results back, realising they weren't necessarily as good as what I could get, I started looking into swapping my course. [M, 68-73]

One year within the university system had given Mathew the 'insider knowledge' of how courses can be assessed. Rather than continuing on a course which related closely to his previous employment, he searched for a course, in the same faculty but a new subject for him, that was assessed in ways that more closely met what he considered his strengths. Mathew once more stressed his statement that the sole reason for changing course at university was because of the predominant form of assessment used: "Like I loved [previous undergraduate course]; I would want to continue that, but just solely because it is heavily weighted on exams I can't do that". [M, 76-78]. Mathew explained his decision to change course in what seems a logical way, as a means of maximising assessment marks at university. Rather than settling for lower grades than he might hope for in a course he enjoyed but which was assessed heavily through examination, he changed course.

As the first generation of his family to enter HE, Mathew's knowledge of assessment at university was not only limited with regard to types of assessment, but also to tutor expectations. When asked about how he had found assessments at university, Mathew stressed the importance to him of the first piece of assessment done when he started his course, a formative assessment where feedback was provided by the tutor, but no mark given. He gave away some of his lack of experience within HE by the way he referred to expectations of this first piece of academic work at HE level: "Er, because it was just simply a trial of what university was expecting..." [M, 276]. Nevertheless, Mathew found the formative assessment a positive experience:

But I found that very useful, um, because ... it was, it was, from that it was clear to see right, this is the kind of work they're expecting from me. It was then better, like after that. [M, 277-279]

The clarification of expected standards in this exercise was an important aspect for Mathew, allowing him to gauge himself and make a realistic judgement of his current academic level in this new environment. The

formative assessment helped him to make the unknown expectations of university clearer, and thus helped his transition to study at HE.

Mathew's comments suggest that his prior academic experiences have had a significant impact on his decisions within HE. The final theme within Mathew's story explores how these previous experiences, both academic and within the workplace, prepared him for successful study at university.

### **How prior experiences prepared Mathew for studying at university**

Mathew experienced a number of different learning environments before attending university. Firstly, within the school environment where both during GCSEs and at A level examinations were the main form of assessment. Mathew then went on to study a BTEC level three qualification, which provided a different educational experience in relation to both assessment, and the way in which university applications were less of a priority. Finally, Mathew had several years within employment, where he developed a number of work-based skills. This complex mix means that Mathew entered university with a wide range of learning experiences; during the interview, he took time to reflect on the impact these experiences had on his transition to and through university.

Throughout the interview Mathew repeated the importance of his BTEC course in preparing him for academic study at university. For example, when questioned about similarities and differences between teaching and assessment in A levels and BTEC, Mathew immediately stressed the ways in which his BTEC prepared him for higher study:

However, everything at college for the BTEC was, is very similar to university, with, like, you'll get given an assignment, you'll get given x amount of time to do it, you've got to use x number of words and um, and you then submit it through an online method. [M, 103-106]

When comparing his university assessment experiences to his BTEC experiences, Mathew again noted the similarity of the process: "...that was very similar to, to BTEC, where we was like, at the start of the term we were given a piece of work, this is what we've got to do and we all knew where we

was going towards.” [M, 117-119]. It may be that, to Mathew, there was a less clear path of where he was going towards when studying for A levels, thus reducing his agency in moving towards that goal.

The usefulness of BTEC in preparation for university was something repeated by Mathew throughout the interview: “I learnt more from the BTEC which I could bring to university, yeah.” [M, 137]. At one point Mathew did acknowledge the role of A levels in supporting his transition, when asked if it was a benefit to have studied both A levels and BTECs before university: “... I feel I benefited more doing both.” [M, 172]. However, he then went on to list only the benefits that he felt studying BTEC provided him:

If I had just gone through with A levels, when I went to university, I feel like I wouldn't have had the experience with referencing. And with referencing and plagiarising being such an important thing that it is, um, I feel that I wouldn't have understood the significance of that. And by going through to BTEC and learning how to do that and do that correctly, has definitely benefitted me. [M, 172-176]

The limited role of A levels in supporting Mathew's academic transition to university in relation to academic skills can therefore be intimated at this point by his omission of them when discussing the perceived benefits of studying both qualifications.

Academic skills development is one key aspect of Mathew's study at college which has supported his academic transition to university. His view of the importance of the BTEC in preparing him for referencing and avoiding plagiarism (see quote above) implies just one way in which this qualification prepared him for study at a higher academic level. This is in contrast to how his A level experience supported his academic transition to HE. In this case, Mathew felt that “For A level, for myself, I wasn't prepped in any of these academic skills such as referencing or critical thinking, or reading academic books.” [M, 124-126]. Indeed, even preparation for examinations appears to be a bolt-on experience, rather than a skill embedded within the subjects studied, with Mathew appearing quite cynical in how he perceived the school prepared him: “There was workshops that we could attend to. They weren't available for all year round. It was very much exam season's here, let's do some workshop.” [M, 132-133]. Academic skills appear, therefore, to have

been limited to immediate need, both temporally and skills-wise. Despite the pressure from the school for A level students to go to university, the teaching, Mathew identified, concentrated solely on passing imminent examinations rather than preparation for future learning. Of course, this is not to suggest that the BTEC course teaching deliberately supported wider academic skills to aid transition to study at HE; rather, Mathew acknowledges that the academic skills used in BTEC more closely align with those used in his experiences of HE.

Mathew was quite unusual compared to many other students entering university with a BTEC, in that his BTEC was unrelated to the HE course he was studying, and also the course he first started in the case study university. However, Mathew did have experience of the area of study through his time in employment:

... when I was doing the finance I was.. I thought I'd be fine with the modules, because the work that I'd, the full-time work that I had was that I was in a finance office. A lot of it... I don't want to say a lot of it, I already knew. But I was not, I **wasn't in the dark** with the subjects. [M, 183-186]

In this case, then, prior work-based experience appears to have supported Mathew's transition into a new subject. Yet when he changed subject to his current course, the topics were completely new to him: "When I changed to [current course] I had no idea what I was going to be learning. I, I knew the subjects that I was going to be learning, all of the course modules were posted on the university website." [M, 186-188]. Despite this apparent disadvantage, Mathew appeared to relish his new course, applying both generic academic skills developed during his BTEC and during his previous year of academic study at university. It may be that academic capital developed in his previous year of university study prepared him for the skills required for study and assessment at HE, allowing him to concentrate on the new content. For example, when Mathew discussed how his first, formative, assessment was marked at university, he said of the feedback he got:

It wasn't your referencing is wrong, your style of writing is wrong, It wasn't that. I was able to academically write, I just needed to get the content behind it. And by getting the feedback I was able to go

into the more detail because I could see that's what I needed to do. [M, 284-287]

This comment of Mathew's implies that when starting university, he was able to write academically but subject content needed development, suggesting that a BTEC, albeit in an unrelated subject, helped to develop his writing skills.

That is not to say that the BTEC fully prepared Mathew for academic writing at university. When asked about academic skills he found he needed to develop when he moved to university, he acknowledged "I'm gonna say that academic writing was one that I needed to develop. Um, I didn't do it at all at A level. In BTEC, we started to do it, but there wasn't as much of a focus on it" [M, 297-298]. As the interview progressed, Mathew also appeared to start to qualify his views on how well the BTEC prepared him for independent study. He considered that, like A level, they kept very much to the syllabus, with most work completed in class:

A lot of the work, especially for myself, a lot of the work that was being graded I was able to do in the, in my time actually physically in the lesson of that subject. And, um, whilst, if, if I had a question on something, I had the tutor there – I was able to go 'what does this bit mean? What... what method do you want me to use for this?' And, er, basically, they didn't spoon-feed us, but they definitely told us the way we should do it for the higher marks. [M, 339-344]

This is in contrast to his experiences in HE where, rather than just relying on lecture notes, "... we were given a list of these are particular books or journals that we \*should\* read from; that's what we \*should\* do, so that's what we did" [M, 349-351]. Mathew acknowledged that, whilst BTEC more effectively prepared him for study at university than his A levels, it was his experience in employment that most prepared him for the independent study needed in HE: "Yeah, I er... I think a lot of that has got to do with, with my work experience as well. If I had gone straight from A level/BTEC to university, I think I would have found the jump harder" [M, 355-356].

It was not only in the development of independent study skills that Mathew noted the importance of his prior work experience. When reflecting on

his previous qualifications and their use to him in his current studies, in the end Mathew was quite blunt:

Yeah, I er I don't necessarily think ... my er qualifications have been useful. I've got a broad variety of qualifications, from maths to RS, to IT, um that... that the... I'm not doubting that they're good to have, like I'm fully glad that I've done all of them and have got them but I don't think necessarily that those have helped me with my course. [M, 214-217]

Mathew acknowledged the capital that qualifications hold ("I'm not doubting that they're good to have"), in acting as a means to enter HE, but noted their limited use in his current course. In contrast, his work experience supported Mathew's move into a subject unrelated to his previous qualifications: "I've been able to, like, give out examples of how we've done that in my place of work, rather than just thinking, like this could work and trying to theorise how you could motivate people" [M, 223-225]. It is unsurprising that Mathew prioritised the importance of subject content in his learning and how prior experience had prepared him. However, he could prioritise this because his previous educational experiences, particularly within BTEC, had provided him with a sound foundation upon which to build new subject understanding.

In summary, then, Mathew's route to university has been both uncertain and circuitous. Whilst A levels had given him some academic capital with which to enter university, whilst at university, it was both the BTEC and his previous work experience that paved the way for a smooth transition to study at this level. Mathew made active decisions to maximise his academic gains at university, primarily through changing course to one where the assessments better suited his strengths. Therefore, whilst Mathew's initial journey into HE was one with false starts and indecision, as his academic capital developed, he was more able to make decisions that maximise return on the economic capital he has invested in his education.

### **Overarching themes from the participants' narratives**

Although IPA stresses the importance of the idiographic (Smith et al., 2009), there are also clear themes running across all three participants' experiences, although there may be contrasting experiences within those

themes. Throughout each participant's data run threads of the overarching themes of: decision-making, assessment and learner identity.

### **Decision-making in post-16 and post-18 education**

All three participants make decisions about their post-16 and post-18 education. However, there are differences in the level of agency that each participant has in their decision-making. At 16, both Mathew and Shea believe that they are able to make decisions about their study. Ted, on the other hand, feels that he has decisions made for him, with the school only interested in keeping him, rather than guiding him to what might be best for his future. All three participants believe that they made active decisions about studying in HE, but all three are to some extent limited by structural factors or by lack of academic capital. Shea's journey to HE appears most straightforward, where she makes an apparently rational decision to study at an HEI which provides the support she values. For Mathew, there is pressure from the school to apply for HE, although he does not appear keen to go; only after some time out of education does he consider himself ready. Ted believes that he has succeeded in spite of his school experiences; however, his decision about where to study is limited by his lack of knowledge about HE.

### **The impact of assessment**

Another overarching theme within the participants' narratives is that of assessment. However, how the participants perceive forms of assessment differs. Examination is a form of assessment that Shea appears comfortable with, not least because her school provides extensive revision support during her A level lessons. Shea's privileging of A levels conflates the knowledge she learns with the method used to assess it. To her, the assignments required for BTEC assessments are basic and do not require understanding. Instead, she perceived examinations as rigorous and a sign of being 'academic'. In contrast, both Mathew and Ted dislike examinations as a form of assessment. Both consider themselves more comfortable with the varied assessment formats used in both their BTECs and their HE assessment. Indeed, for Mathew, his dislike of examinations was sufficient for him to change his degree after his first year in HE, despite enjoying the

course content. For each participant, then, assessment method has had an impact on their decisions post-16 and through university.

### **Learner identity: How the participants see themselves as learners**

The final overarching theme for the participants' data is that of learner identity. Each participant's narrative gives some indication of how they perceive their own learner identity and, at times, how they perceive others' and how others perceive them. Mathew, at 17, did not appear to see himself as a student preparing for university, in contrast to his teachers' perceptions of him. Only after both a BTEC and work experience does he perceive himself as being ready for HE. However, he does not appear to define himself by his qualifications, unlike the other two participants, perhaps because of his time out of education before starting university. Shea and Ted both appear to clearly define their learner identities. Shea identifies herself as an A level student, despite having also studied a BTEC. Ted, in contrast, defines his learner identity as being built on his BTEC qualification, as it allowed him to show the educational success he knew he was capable of but not allowed to undertake with A levels. Shea's and Ted's learner identities define how they see their university study, comparing themselves to others who have made different decisions.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter has explored the perceptions of the three participants as they discuss how they moved from post-16 education to university and how they perceived their prior qualifications supported their transition to and partly through university. IPA foregrounds the experiences of individuals, and so the narratives provide an interpretative analysis of each participant's perceptions. Despite the differences in individual experiences, similar threads run through each participant's account. These threads can be drawn into the overarching themes of the participants' accounts: decision-making, assessment and learner identity. Whilst this chapter has discussed these experiences as they relate to the individual participants, the following chapter will locate the overarching themes within the wider literature. It will also

consider how Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, misrecognition and symbolic violence can be used as a means of considering how structural factors impact on the participants' agency and how these structural factors may be hidden from the participants.

## **Chapter Five: A wider view of the participants' experiences**

The previous chapter provided narratives of the lived experiences of Shea, Mathew and Ted. The study has provided these three participants with an opportunity to reflect on and communicate their unique experiences. As combination students, their narratives highlight their routes to and through HE and how they perceive a combination of BTECs and A levels have prepared them for HE. Within this discussion chapter, I will use the narrative from the previous chapter to discuss the participants' experiences in relation to existing literature, in particular the use of Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, misrecognition and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu's (2000) concept of symbolic violence is of particular interest as it can be used to explore the negative impact of structures that can appear supportive to individuals and groups. Using the participants' narratives, I argue that government policies on qualifications and assessment, and how they are enacted by schools are, in reality, forms of symbolic violence against the participants, as first-generation students moving into HE. I propose that government policies on assessment have a considerable impact on individuals' educational decision-making and identity in post-compulsory education. Government policies, and their enactment by schools, limit choice of qualifications post-16 and post-18, and affect how participants view their academic identities.

This study highlights how students with a combination of experience of both A levels and BTECs make decisions around education and transition to and through university. Thus, the scene will be set by firstly considering how the participants view academic and vocational qualifications, the focus of the study. The chapter then explores the three overarching themes that emerged from the data: assessment, decision-making and identity. My exploration of the participants' narratives in Chapter Four highlights the importance of assessment to all three participants. This overarching theme will be explored first: I consider the role of assessment in the participants' narratives and how previous experiences in assessments have moulded later actions. Intimately

linked to assessment are the two other overarching themes that I highlight from the participants' data: decision-making and learner identity. I will consider the factors that the participants perceived affected their post-16 and post-18 educational decision-making. I explore whether the participants' decisions are freely rational, as argued by RAT (Goldthorpe, 1998), or bounded by structural factors, and by the habitus (Bourdieu, 1993) of the participants and of the institutions they attended. Finally, the chapter will consider the impact of factors such as prior educational experiences and assessment on the participants' identities as learners. Throughout the discussion, I will consider how structures such as the school and government policies impact on individuals such as the participants.

The participants' narratives focus on a snapshot in time of their academic experiences. All three participants had undergone a year of study in university at the time of their interviews. Yet their experiences post-16 and post-18 will have been significantly affected by earlier experiences, outwith the purview of this research. All three themes identified from the participants' stories will have been affected by earlier educational experiences. For example, Bonetti and Brown (2018) discuss the importance of quality early years education in reducing the educational impact of social and economic disadvantage on children. For disadvantaged children, the attainment gap increases at every stage of their education (Education Endowment Foundation, 2017). Decisions about GCSE options, which affect post-16 decisions, are themselves affected by a number of factors, including the socio-economic background of the parents. For example, children from a lower socio-economic background are more likely to study applied GCSEs, which might limit future educational decisions (Henderson et al., 2016). Furthermore, as identified in Chapter Two, decisions about where to study at university have a lasting impact on employment and income (Wakeling & Savage, 2015). Therefore, whilst this discussion focuses on factors affecting the participants' decisions around post-16 and post-18 education, it is situated in the wider context of a lifetime of economic, political and social effects on the education of these young people.

As discussed in Chapter Two, WP students often enter HE with a mix of qualifications or with vocational qualifications (Hutchinson, 2016; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). Therefore, the next section will discuss how the participants view their non-traditional qualifications, particularly in light of rhetoric around the academic/vocational qualification divide.

### **The academic/vocational divide**

Both implicit and explicit within the participants' narratives is the divide between academic and vocational education. This is a key point to note, as all three participants initially studied or wanted to study solely A levels. They all initially considered themselves as A level students. We can most clearly see this perception in Shea, who believes that A levels confer a greater status: "Yeah, I think there always will be a stigma that A levels are more difficult, more demanding... and a better qualification in general" [S, 377-378]. Shea therefore privileges this academic qualification over the vocational BTEC she took. Initially, Ted also privileges A levels, seeing himself as an A level science student until he is not permitted to study his initial options. For him, BTECs were lesser. Ted emphatically changes his mind about the value of BTECs when he undertakes his own BTEC and through it gains entry to university: "I definitely feel like it's a valued qualification. And it's definitely more so nowadays. But five to six years ago, maybe not" [T, 292-293]. For Ted and Shea, the difference between the qualifications is reinforced rather than being viewed as a positive synthesis of learning, where different methods of teaching, learning and assessment might broaden academic skills development. Mathew is less concerned about the perceptions of his qualifications because his time out in employment adds an extra factor into his academic identity: "My work experience, however, I would say has helped me more so" [M, 217]. As Myhill and Venner (2019) remind us, it is often unhelpful to consider a binary of academic and vocational students, due to the variation within these categories, as well as those between categories. This argument is reinforced when we consider the range of routes through which the participants come to study a mix of BTECs and A levels.

Although the academic/vocational divide in qualifications may not be helpful, such a divide is still apparent in post-16 education. That the participants attend university with a combination of experiences of qualifications appears at times in their narratives to be despite government policy, implemented by schools, rather than because of it. Despite Richards' (2016) research identifying that headteachers are increasingly encouraging students to take a combination of qualifications, this does not appear to have always been encouraged in the participants' schools, hence their more varied route to a combination of qualifications.

Despite claims of equivalence of A levels and BTEC (Herbert, 2019), there is a clear difference in value given to A levels and BTEC qualifications by policymakers, many universities and by the public (Ofqual, 2019). The difference has been reinforced within recent policy through the Independent Panel on Technical Education's (2016) report stressing the separation of academic from vocational qualifications, focusing on the use of vocational qualifications for entry to employment and only academic qualifications such as A levels providing a route to HE. This may, therefore, limit both decision-making and social mobility. The dichotomy is strengthened further by how the current government refers to A levels, and how it has sought to limit and, indeed eliminate, BTECs (DfE & Williamson, 2021).

Government policy around post-16 qualifications repeatedly refers to A levels as the gold standard qualification (DfE, 2016a), in spite of rhetoric around equivalency. In contrast to the gold standard of A levels, there is a perception that BTECs are less challenging. Recent government policy is leading to the removal of many BTEC qualifications, labelled by the government as "low quality" (DfE & Williamson, 2021, para. 1). Indeed, the term 'BTEC' is colloquially used to refer to something other, something of lower quality (Payne, 2020; Urban Dictionary, 2011). That such a connotation exists is not solely due to government policy, of course, but repeated government policies to restructure and ultimately remove BTECs (see, for example, Camden, 2020) must affect perceptions of the qualification. For example, the removal of many BTECs is in part to facilitate the introduction and uptake of T levels,

what the government have called the “gold standard” (Keegan, 2021, para. 2) of vocational qualification, a significant proportion of which is assessed through examinations. It is interesting to note the eliding of the terms used to describe both A levels and the new vocational qualifications, T levels, in contrast to ‘low quality’ qualifications such as BTECs.

The perception of a qualification is important not just because of how the public might perceive it, but also how education professionals view it. For example, only 26% of teachers surveyed considered applied general qualifications (not specifically BTECs) to be trusted qualifications, compared to 90% believing it to be true for A levels (Ofqual, 2022a). Shea talks about the lack of support she would receive from the school and the expectation that she would work by herself to complete the BTEC: “When she came back, it was like three months until the end of the year and she said ‘have you done anything?’ And I was like ‘no!’” [S, 36]. Whilst Shea does indeed prove capable of the BTEC (not least because it is the same topic as one of her A levels), the implicit message about BTECs from the school to Shea is that they require little effort and are worth even less. This is in stark contrast to Shea’s experiences with her A levels, where she praises the level of support provided.

Shea’s perception of the school’s lack of support for her BTEC is a form of symbolic violence, borne of the school’s perception of BTECs in contrast to A levels. Such a perception is embedded through society, where vocational qualifications are less valued (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Hutchinson, 2016; Richards, 2016), and also seems to impact on how Shea develops her learner identity (explored later in this chapter). Schools and other stakeholders, such as parents, HEIs and employers, reinforce this perception through advice and guidance to students (Hoelscher et al., 2008), tracking some students to academic A levels, and thus a clear route to HE, and others to vocational qualifications and little encouragement to apply for HE, as appear to have happened at Mathew’s school. Such tracking may lead to social reproduction, as BTECs are taken more frequently by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). Social

reproduction would occur as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, more likely to take BTECS for a range of reasons, may be limited in where they can apply to university (Gicheva & Petrie, 2018). This has an ongoing impact on future earnings (Britton et al., 2021).

The participants' narratives highlight the implicit and explicit messages about the relative value of A levels and BTECs within their respective schools.

Mathew perceives that the school expects students to conform to rigid expectations, depending on the qualifications they were enrolled on, with A level students being encouraged to apply to HE, and BTEC students encouraged into apprenticeships and employment. Mathew's school therefore appears to be maintaining a rigid dichotomy of academic against vocational qualifications, as though maintaining social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977). In contrast, Shea's school appears initially supportive in allowing her to study a mix of BTEC and A levels after she drops an A level. However, Shea's narrative, discussed above, identifies a clear message from the school about the value of the qualification: requiring no support from school, and so considered of little worth. Similarly, Ted perceives that he was pushed towards a BTEC in engineering with what he considers to be more rigorous mathematics, arguing, "I believe I have the right maths level to do biology but maybe not engineering" [T, 40-41]. For all three participants, in differing ways, there therefore appears to be privileging of A levels over BTECs.

Through all three participants' experiences, then, there is the reinforcement of government pedagogic action (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) on the academic/vocational divide, reinforced by the pedagogic authority (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) of the schools. The symbolic violence of the pedagogic work done by the schools can be misrecognised by the participants as supportive whilst the pedagogic work maintains the academic/vocational divide. Ted and his mum follow the guidance of the school and enroll him on a mix of BTEC and A levels in which he has no real interest; Mathew felt that his school encourages tracking of BTEC students into work and apprenticeships, rather than HE; Shea absorbs the idea implied by her

school's actions that BTECs are less valuable. Whilst the participants' experiences suggest that the schools may be presenting the world as it is, and managing the expectations of their students, research does identify that individual teachers may either facilitate or gatekeep certain options, for example in considering elite universities (Oliver & Ketley, 2010) or marginalising moderately attaining students' HE applications (Burgess, 2021). School policies (as in Mathew's school) or the actions of individual educators (such as Ted's BTEC tutor) can have a significant impact on whether students are encouraged to expand or to limit their "horizons for action" (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 34).

In part, the perceptions of A levels as being of better quality than BTECs may be the hierarchical positioning of academic over vocational qualifications, but possibly also a privileging of assessment by examination over other forms of assessment in government policy. For the current government, then, the value of a qualification appears to be determined at least in part by the method of assessment. This view appears to be internalized by one of the participants, Shea, and will be explored in theme three – identity. Within the next section of the discussion, I will explore further the symbolic violence surrounding the academic/vocational dichotomy by considering the participants' experiences of assessment in their post-16 and post-18 education, the first overarching theme drawn from the data.

### **Theme 1: Assessment**

The first theme identified through the participant narratives is assessment. Assessment by examination has become the primary means of assessment pre-18, particularly for qualifications classed as academic. This theme explores what this has meant for the participants, but also considers the wider implications of assessment, particularly in relation to government policies and how these are enacted within schools. I will analyse how examinations have become considered a gold standard for assessment in recent years, and the impact this has on perceptions of the different qualifications the participants have undertaken. I will discuss government assessment policy in relation to the reduction in teacher autonomy and the

marketisation of education. This section will also consider the role of assessment through examination as a means of social reproduction.

All three participants discuss the impact that assessment has had through their time in education, and this impact has been significant in decision-making and in how the participants perceive themselves. Assessment, then, underpins the two other main themes of the participants' experiences – decision-making and identity. The participants' initial post-16 decisions were to study solely A levels. Whilst Ted's grade C in GCSE mathematics meant this path was no longer available to him, both Mathew and Shea initially started sixth form by studying A levels alone. In Mathew's case, he took all three A levels before starting his BTEC. Shea dropped an A level in biology and took a BTEC in the same subject as an A level she was studying. For all three, then, assessment by examination for most of their initial courses would have been an expectation. Yet, assessment by examination appears at times to act as a structural barrier in their education. However, whilst the participants' narratives uncovered their assessment preferences, none questioned the use of examinations in general. Rather, they adapted their own decision-making to best meet their preferences. This may be an indication of the prevalence of post-performativity within education. Wilkins (2011) notes the generational difference in teachers in regard to their views on measures of performance, with those more recently educated in a similar performatised environment being more at ease with the many measures of performativity. It is likely that students currently moving through the education system similarly do not question what appears to them to be the way things are.

Much of this section considers assessment through examination, as the participants often focused their discussions around examinations, frequently discussing other forms of assessment in contrast to examinations. Whilst all participants discussed assessment within their narratives, their perceptions were not homogeneous, particularly in relation to assessment by examination. For example, Shea builds her view of herself as 'academic' through her preference for examinations as a form of assessment and

contrasts this to her BTEC experience: “BTECS, when I did them, didn’t have any examinations. So like it wasn’t really about teaching it was just do it and you’re done” [S, 224-225]. In contrast, both Ted and Mathew believe that examinations have had a negative impact on their educational journey. That is not to say that they have failed many examinations; rather, they perceive that examinations as a means of assessment do not give a true demonstration of their knowledge and limited their progress and expectations. For Mathew, this led to him changing degree; Ted’s failure to meet the required GCSE mathematics grade had a significant impact on his views of education and on his desired progression to A levels.

The three participants took their BTECs at a time when BTEC assessment did not include external examinations. The absence of examinations within their BTECs meant an alternative qualification was available for Ted and Mathew, with alternative forms of assessment they felt more comfortable with: “I prefer the BTEC method. And, um, the grade that I got from BTEC was much better than my A levels” [M, 244-245]. This assessment preference is exemplified by Ted’s experiences. Ted found the transition to alternative forms of assessment a positive experience, rekindling a positive learner identity and reinforcing his convictions that he’s “not a stupid person” [T, 27]. His ADHD and associated concentration and memory issues may cause problems in written examinations (Jansen et al., 2017), so the alternative methods of assessment for his BTEC allowed him to demonstrate his abilities. However, with recent changes to the BTEC (Pearson, n.d.-a), introducing compulsory external assessments (most commonly examinations), this examination-free route into HE has recently become closed to others who might follow Mathew’s and Ted’s routes. This may marginalise those for whom examinations are not an effective method to demonstrate learning.

Whilst this study is a detailed account of three individuals’ experiences, their lived experiences of the phenomena under study can be used as a means of considering the impact of wider social and political factors on individuals such as the three participants. For instance, the implementation of government

education policies, particularly in relation to assessment, has an effect on how the participants view themselves and their education, and the agency they perceive they have in their decisions on education. In this theme, the political nature of assessment is considered, and the impact of it illustrated through the experiences of the participants.

How students are assessed is a political decision. Ball (2021) argues that recent Coalition and Conservative governments in the UK have been characterised by aspects of nostalgia and cultural restorationism; this includes their approach to assessment. Indeed, Woods, McCaldin, Hipkiss, Tyrrell and Dawes (2019) argue that the school assessment system is shaped by those who have succeeded within such a system, who believe that such a high stakes system is best able to demonstrate educational success. For example, the former Conservative Education Minister Michael Gove has repeatedly aimed to return to the forms of assessment he experienced, calling variously for a return to O levels and CSEs, a reduction in assessed coursework, the use of end of course assessments and assessment reforms to make qualifications “more rigorous and demanding” (Chitty, 2014, p. 198), representing the move away from teacher assessment. Within A levels and GCSEs, there have been policy changes under the current Conservative government to assessment primarily through end of course examinations (Baird et al., 2019; DfE, 2016a; Ofqual, 2013, 2014). This change is to, as DfE (2016a) state, ensure that the qualifications are “more rigorous” (p. 23), rather than using school-based assessments or modular examinations. Nick Gibb, Conservative Minister for School Standards states that “unseen external examinations are the fairest and most valid means we have to assess what pupils have learned in their time at school” (Gibb, 2021, para. 17). Yet Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbeck and Stobart (2017) argue that assessment design is influenced more by considerations of the mechanics of testing than it is by theoretical underpinnings of the assessment methods. This is supported by Lu and Sireci’s (2007) work on the impact of time limits in examinations, where limits to length of examinations (needed for logistical reasons) reduce examination validity by focussing on speed rather than knowledge. UCAS (2014) also identify that

some students will not be able to effectively demonstrate their knowledge if assessed solely by end of course examinations. Furthermore, Baird and Black (2013) state that English assessment culture, influenced by government education policies, focuses on the argument that a person's underlying ability can be judged through end of course examinations, rather than it being a judgement on how they performed on that day. Therefore, whilst Government assertions, implemented in policy, stress the fairness of examinations as a means of assessment, there is limited evidence that solely end of course examinations are, indeed, the fairest method of assessment (Ofqual, 2014; Vitello & Williamson, 2017). Ted's and Mathew's perceptions, as outlined in Chapter Four, illuminate the impact that such policies have on students, acting as a structure that limits decision-making and potentially leading to social reproduction.

Along with the increase in end of course examination, there is a concomitant decrease in teacher-based assessment, as part of the deprofessionalisation (Ball, 2021) of the teaching profession. For example, in the recent GCSE and A level reforms, almost all teacher-based assessment has been removed (Marshall, 2017). Since then, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant a short-term return to teacher assessed grades (TAGs). In spite of government concerns over teacher assessment which led to it mostly being removed prior to COVID-19, this time-limited return to TAGs was viewed positively by the head of Ofqual (Stone, 2021), suggesting that at least in some education quarters, the value of teachers in assessment is still viewed positively. The perceived classification of general/ vocational qualifications as primarily for entry into the workplace suggests that BTECs initially were not under policy pressure to conform to apparent government policies that academic qualifications (that is, those that can lead to HE) require external examination. With WP, however, and more students entering HE with BTECs (BIS & DfE, 2015; Budd, 2017; Gicheva & Petrie, 2018; UCAS, 2015), it appears as though recent Conservative government policies have sought to standardise BTEC assessment through the inclusion of externally assessed examinations. It may also be an extension of the Government's apparent policy of limiting teacher-based assessment. That this is a political ideology

appears apparent due to greater use of end of course examinations since the Coalition and Conservative governments came to power (Marshall, 2017), deprofessionalising (Ball, 2021) the teaching profession. It is also in contrast to how other countries assess in schools, where a mix of examinations and continuous assessments or teacher-assessed coursework is often used (Freedman, 2022; Smith, 2021).

The recent return to predominantly end of course examination as the assessment format for GCSEs and A levels might appear to be a positive move in the eyes of a public bombarded by stories about grade inflation (see, for example, Linford, 2016; Sylvester & Woolcock, 2021; Turner, 2022). However, there appears to be little evidence that examinations are the most effective means of measuring education attainment (Baird & Black, 2013), even if they are perceived as such by policy-makers. Nevertheless, examinations have become normalised so that they become part of official practice; that is, according to Bourdieu (1990), the use of examinations as a form of assessment has become codified. Thomson's (2005) use of the phrase "the appearance of scientific neutrality" (p. 744) can be used to highlight the normalising role of codification in reinforcing political policies. The use of examinations as the overwhelming form of assessment in academic qualifications appears scientifically neutral, but contrasting policies from different governments on how to assess different qualifications would suggest that political pressure has a significant impact on assessment. For example, New Labour educational policies which allowed a wider range of assessment activities and teacher assessment were removed by the Coalition and Conservative governments, to return to end of course assessment for GCSEs and A levels (Marshall, 2017). Therefore, there appears to be little evidence for the scientific neutrality of examinations as the primary means of assessment at 16 and 18 but instead political partisanism.

Indeed, it can be argued that the view of examinations as being best practice in assessment has gone beyond codification, into more widespread belief beyond policy. Wilkins (2011) argues that newer education professionals,

educated and then trained within the performative educational culture of recent years, internalise the performative requirements of modern education, reinforcing the codification of government policies, what Wilkins calls post-performativity. As Delandshere (2001) states, “when teachers are unprepared and unaware of the social consequences of their actions they are, by default, contributing to reproducing the status quo.” (p. 130). That is, the idea of external, end of course examinations has become what Bourdieu (2000) might define as doxa, internalised as the truth with no need to be made explicit. Doxa, such as the use of examinations to measure educational achievement, are reinforced by government rhetoric and policies. Ted and Mathew, as well as other students who feel both intimidated by and disenfranchised from examinations (see, for example, Myhill et al., 2019b), face barriers due to these government policies, in spite of the government rhetoric around WP to HE.

Shea both explicitly and implicitly demonstrates her immersion in the doxa that examinations are a more academic form of assessment. However, she does admit on reflection that the support provided by her school was not helpful in all examination situations. That is, Shea misrecognises the support given to her at school for examination success as a developmental benefit for her, as a student. In reality, it may be that the school is forced to drill students for examinations in order to meet government policies on achievement (Perryman, Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2011), which impact on student recruitment and so on school funding (Gibbons, Machin & Silva, 2007). Nevertheless, Shea appears to remain convinced of the narrative of superiority of both A levels and examinations. The strength of this conviction is demonstrated in her perception of herself as academic and as an A level student, which is explored in more detail within the third theme.

Political policies on assessment naturally impact on how schools approach teaching, learning and assessment when implementing those policies. Both Marshall (2017) and Mansell, James and Assessment Reform Group (2009) highlight the link between politics and assessment, with Mansell et al. (2009) identifying the “extensive powers” (p. 27) that ministers use to steer both curriculum and assessment in schools. Marshall (2017) argues that the

introduction of school league tables led to the increased politicisation of both curriculum and assessment. Within schools, the pressures of benchmarking and league table positioning affects teaching and learning in relation to assessment. For example, Ball (2021) notes the “overbearing pressure” (p. 103) of such measurements leads to a focus on examination results rather than education. Mansell et al. (2009) note the expansion of the purpose of assessments in education, from measuring the learning of individuals to measurement of the effectiveness of institutions, where effectiveness is measured by meeting key performance indicators. A focus on examinations can be seen most clearly in Shea’s school. Although Shea’s narrative gives only a small insight into the organisational habitus of her school, particularly in relation to A level teaching, her repeated reference to extensive support, particularly in examination preparation, suggests that it was not uncommon in the school. Shea’s assertion that half of each lesson was taken up by recapping prior learning, “...and that would take up half the lesson” [S, 143], even if exaggerated, identifies a focus on drilling for examinations. Mansell et al. (2009) identify a change in the focus of teaching to a system “where teachers drill pupils in techniques for earning marks at the expense of teaching for deeper learning” (p. 7) for months of the academic year prior to assessment. Indeed, Gerwitz, Maguire, Neumann and Towers (2021) found that this starts in Key Stage 2 assessment. It is unsurprising that such teaching to the test occurs, when teacher pay progression and disciplinary processes in secondary school may be linked to pupils achieving target grades (Gerwitz et al., 2021).

Shea’s positive experiences of examinations may in part be formed from the extensive examination preparation she gained whilst in sixth form. This contrasts with Mathew’s school, which only puts on examination skills support during examination season. It is interesting to note the differences in institutional approaches to examination-based assessment. Both Shea and Mathew were studying A levels, but their schools differ in the approach to supporting students with skills for A level assessment, with Shea’s school explicitly embedding support within each subject. Mathew’s school bolts on support as examinations approach. This may relate to schools’ differing

responses to the use of league tables and the impact of assessment results on school league tables as measures of school effectiveness. As Day and Gu (2018) argue, the values and culture of the headteacher in a school can have a significant impact on how the school responds to and implements government policy. However, so can other factors such as teacher availability as a resource (Braun, Ball, Maguire & Hoskins, 2011). The way that schools respond to assessment policy, and the resources they can use to best meet requirements, therefore, may differ significantly between schools.

Shea's experience of drilling for examination preparation in her A levels is an indication of how her school supports the development of very specific forms of academic capital. Ted's and Mathew's experiences suggest that these examination-based forms of academic capital development were not a significant part of their own schools' hidden curricula (Watson et al., 2009). However, Ted's BTEC tutor at college appears to have played a key role in helping Ted develop his academic capital in preparation for HE: "I know it sounds trivial and stupid, but that's [academic writing, referencing] stuff I never learnt at school" [T, 233-234]. Ted's relative comfort with HE assessment (which for him was primarily not examination-based) demonstrates the importance of such support being made explicit, not remaining hidden. Woods et al. (2019) contend that there are implicit forms of assessment within examinations, including skills not covered as part of the curriculum, such as examination technique, and speed of handwriting. Those who can demonstrate greater proficiency in such implicit skills and knowledge are more likely to pass assessments. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) consider the relative value placed on theoretical knowledge ("symbolic mastery", p. 50) or vocational knowledge ("practical mastery", p.50). They argue that members of the dominant classes will already be imbued with an understanding of the language and behaviours surrounding symbolic mastery, and so have an advantage over others from more dominated groups. This mastery will include an understanding of forms of educational assessment, such as familiarity with the implicit pedagogy of assessment by examinations, without the need for explicit instruction. Such hidden curricula may in part be made explicit by school support, such as examination

technique workshops or drilling. As Woods et al. (2019) note, such theoretical or symbolic mastery is often the work of individual teachers (as in Ted's case) or institutions (in Shea's school), rather than being part of the explicit curriculum.

In contrast to the participants' experiences of GCSE and A level assessment, assessment in their BTEC qualifications was more varied. As previously mentioned, all three participants took their BTECs when external assessment was not used. Ted and Mathew both benefited from the alternative methods of assessment used in BTEC, with Ted keen to stress the relevance of these assessment methods to his desired university course: "It is pretty much a mirror image" [T, 85]. Yet recent government pressure for reform of vocational qualifications, including applied generals such as BTECs, has led to the introduction of external assessments, usually examination-based (Vitello & Williamson, 2017), to purportedly increase rigour and robustness (DfE, 2016b). It appears that government policy has been to reform vocational qualifications into a simulation of A levels. Though ostensibly to improve parity between BTECs and A levels as a means of entering HE (Ofqual, 2018a), instead the extension of examination-based assessment to BTEC may demoralise students who have made the decision to take the qualifications as they contained no examinations (Vitello & Williamson, 2017). Indeed, it may more than demoralise – such students may no longer have a way of representing their understanding in alternative ways to examinations. For example, Morris, Milton and Goldstone (2019) identified that students with disabilities often sought to avoid modules and courses with examinations due to the structural barriers of time-limited examinations. As Tai et al. (2022) note, changes to make assessment more inclusive to people with disabilities would also make it more inclusive for the increasingly diverse student population as a whole. The increasing use of examinations as a means of assessment in post-16 education, then, can have a considerable impact on individuals, affecting their educational decision-making, their progress and their learner identity. Focusing on examinations can disadvantage those who better represent their knowledge through other forms of assessment (Morris, Milton & Goldstone, 2019; UCAS, 2014; Vitello

& Williamson, 2017), such as those who might follow a similar route to Mathew and Ted.

### **Assessment in HE**

With the increasing politicisation of assessment, there has been a concomitant decrease in school autonomy within the field of pre-18 education. In contrast, within HE, there is still some autonomy in assessment. Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet's (2007) study found that post-92 universities they studied were more likely to use a range of methods of assessment than the Russell Group universities. Russell Group universities maintained systems of assessment more focused on examinations (Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet, 2007) aligning more clearly with current political ideologies of assessment rigor, and the historical precedence of examinations for assessing for entry to high status professions (Broadfoot, 1996). Nevertheless, universities' relative autonomy from government control within the field of education, even within the confines of surveillance by quangos such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2020), means that universities have significant independence in assessment. The participants' discussion of assessment at their post-92 university was generally more limited in scale than discussion about assessment pre-HE; however, it was generally positive. Even where assessment methods were not of the preferred style, such as for Mathew in his first course at university, he was able to make use of his knowledge of the university and its systems of assessment to change to a course more aligned to his assessment preferences.

Students at university, therefore, especially those who have studied A levels, may encounter a range of methods of assessment new to them. Assessment experiences at school or college directly affect confidence in assessments in HE (Myhill & Morris, 2019). All three participants are clear in their assessment preferences and confidence in undertaking assessment at university, and this appears linked to their previous experiences. Such a finding is supported by Myhill and Morris (2019), who found that HE students they interviewed preferred the forms of assessment they were most familiar with. However, many students, even A level students experienced in taking

examinations, preferred assessment through coursework rather than examinations (Myhill & Morris, 2019). Ted's experience of feeling better prepared than A level students on his HE course for the varied assessments required at university ("and we had to write a paper. You know, a research paper and I had absolutely no issues with it" [T, 100-101]) is supported by BTEC students in Myhill et al.'s (2019b) study. They considered themselves more comfortable than A level students in a range of assessment methods used in both their BTEC and HE, such as presentations and coursework. Those in Myhill et al.'s (2019b) study who had undertaken a combination of A levels and BTEC again felt confident in coursework and other forms of assessment in HE. However, BTEC only students in Myhill et al.'s (2019b) study comment on a lack of preparedness for examinations. Whilst A level students felt more comfortable with examinations, the fact that a range of examination types were used in HE was disconcerting for many, particularly the use of multiple-choice examinations (Myhill et al., 2019b). This was certainly experienced by Shea when she reflected on a multiple-choice examination taken the day before the interview, and her lack of experience in this method of assessment: "Because in A level, and, well, BTEC you don't have any multiple choice." [S, 203]. This type of examination was one that her previous educational experiences and school-based drilling had not prepared her for, illustrating further support for the view that prior educational experiences of assessment support confidence in those forms of assessment when transitioning to HE. Focusing pre-HE assessment on examinations, such as in GCSEs and A levels, may affect successful academic transition to HE, at least initially.

### **The role of assessment in social reproduction**

The impact of assessment methods on student progress and identity is an important factor to consider. This is because limiting assessment to primarily a single method can have a significant impact on some sections of society. As mentioned previously, if there is a differential between schools in how, or indeed whether, implicit methods of assessment in examinations are taught (Woods et al., 2019) then students not from the dominant social group, with

more limited social (and particularly academic) capital, will be less successful within these examination-based assessments. Students can become excluded or exclude themselves from further education, as they believe failure or discomfort with dominant forms of, for example, assessment is due to “unequal ability” (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 110). This can then affect their perceptions of themselves as learners, and their plans for future education. For example, Ted states: “I just basically failed the AS levels big time” [T, 41-42]. Both Ted and Mathew see examinations as barriers to progress and in Ted’s case, his dislike of examinations almost led to exclusion from post-16 education. For Ted, his ambitions for A levels are blocked; for Mathew, an extra year of student debt is deemed by him to be an adequate alternative to being assessed through examinations: “So this year, I ended up redoing level 4 but on [current course]” [M, 71-74]. Without this ‘insider knowledge’ of how courses differ, Mathew may have withdrawn from university. Therefore, increased assessment through examination may lead to social reproduction rather than WP to HE. Bourdieu (1976) states that qualifications are seen as impartial and as being awarded on merit, rather than what they are: arbitrary measures of social and economic capital. In this way, failure in examinations can be attributed to natural inability and not measures to reproduce inequality (Bourdieu, 1976). Reproduction of inequality through assessment can occur when the method and means of assessment is embedded within the customs of the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1976), thus disadvantaging those from the dominated culture, with limited academic capital, like the participants of this study and their families.

The structural barrier of assessment almost solely through examination both pre- and post-16 can be considered to act in a way to maintain differentials in HE access. Such differentials in access are important as university attended can affect future earnings and employment prospects and thus contribute to reproduction of social inequalities (Britton, Dearden, Shephard & Vignoles, 2016). The BTEC qualification has allowed students whose knowledge may not be appropriately demonstrated through examinations, such as Ted and Mathew, a route into university. Nevertheless, there is a potential penalty for students opting out (voluntarily or through school guidance) of A level-based

examination assessment, due to HEI perceptions surrounding alternative qualifications for HE (Ofqual, 2019). For the participants, then, the use of examinations as a key method of assessment pre-18 is a form of symbolic violence, limiting decision-making for those with less academic capital, and reducing competition for elite universities for those from the dominant social group. A combination of both A levels and BTEC may be a means of reducing the impact of the violence through gaining qualifications with greater academic capital (A levels) whilst not having to rely solely on assessment by examination. This is a compromise that has been curbed by recent changes to BTEC qualifications. This is borne out by recent research (Rogers & Spours, 2020) that indicates that the reforms to GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications have now affected attainment, with a stagnation in performance. They argue that this is greatest in middle and lower achievers, who are more likely to be from lower socio-economic groups (Rogers & Spours, 2020).

Assessment, particularly within school, then, is embedded within the political field. Government policies dictate how qualifications are assessed, and how qualification results are used as a measure of school, as well as individual, performance (DfE, 2020). In a neoliberal environment, such measures are to encourage the perception of choice in education, with government policies encouraging rational decision-making over qualifications and education (Vincent, Braun & Ball, 2010). However, the participants' experiences of decision-making post-16 and post-18 suggest that other factors have as much impact, if not more, than performance measures. How the participants made their decisions about post-16 and post-18 education will be explored in the next theme.

## **Theme 2: Decision-making**

As highlighted in Chapter Two, it is important to recognise that determining educational pathways should be considered acts of decision-making rather than free choice (Reay & Lucey, 2003; Wright, 2005). Each participant's story highlights the process of decision-making for post-16 and post-18 education. Each participant discusses or alludes to limits placed upon them by others,

and/or limits that they placed upon themselves during decision-making about both post-GCSE education, and HE. This theme explores how structures in place in education limit the participants' decisions, despite the illusion of active choice-making. However, for some, the limits are hidden, leading to symbolic violence being enacted upon them. The participants' decision-making will be explored chronologically, starting with decisions about post-16 education, before considering decision-making about HE.

### **Decision-making about post-16 education**

For all three participants, decision-making about where to study post-16 is the path of least resistance, remaining at the same school they had attended up to 16. As Hodgson and Spours (2013) argue, for middle-attaining students, staying in the same school post-GCSE is remaining within their comfort zone. They also state that it is convenient for the schools to encourage such students to stay on for sixth form, aiming to retain students who might otherwise explore alternative providers (Foskett, Dyke & Maringe, 2008; Hodgson & Spours, 2013). Both Hodgson and Spours (2008) and Fuller, McCrum and Macfadyen (2014) identify that there is pressure for schools to retain students to their sixth forms, in order to retain pupil funding, which is at a higher rate in sixth form (Fuller et al., 2014). Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) note the pressure from schools on parents and pupils, to retain pupils at sixth form. Nevertheless, funding is not just dependent on 'bums on seats' (Foskett et al., 2008) but also achievement. The influence of achievement on funding therefore has an impact on advice and guidance given by schools with sixth forms, with schools acting as gatekeepers to qualifications. At this stage the participants have limited agency in decision-making – they may appear to make a choice about staying at their schools, but this is a decision of convenience and may not be in the participants' best interest, particularly for Ted.

Ted wanted to take science A levels but was only allowed to take a mix of BTEC and A levels, before changing to college to take just BTEC applied science. School gatekeeping of A levels limited Ted's agency in decision-making. Ted's experiences align with those discussed by Rouncefield-Swales (2014) and Hutchinson (2016) who both found that students' plans changed

(or were changed for them) after initial results at the end of year 12. The guidance of Ted into alternative qualifications in the sixth form of his school is a form of symbolic violence. Ted's school set an arbitrary requirement of a grade B in GCSE mathematics to be able to study sciences at A level, a practice by which schools guide students towards BTECs (Hutchinson, 2016). The school guides Ted to qualifications that they consider he might achieve, thus retaining funding (Fuller et al., 2014; Hodgson & Spours, 2008). Greer (as cited in English & Bolton, 2016) argues that a school's success is not only measured by the success of its pupils, but also by the "successful selection of losers" (p. 16). That is, schools benefit by identifying those who are less likely to succeed, and managing them out of the system, be that through alternative qualifications or through gatekeeping.

The arbitrary point for admittance to Ted's sixth form of a grade B in GCSE mathematics is in contrast to that required for entry to HE to study sciences, usually grade C unless for very competitive degree courses (Learn Direct, n.d.). Such a requirement is what Bourdieu calls the cultural arbitrary, which is imposed and maintained by the pedagogic action of the school (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Jenkins (2002) identifies that pedagogic action is enforced by pedagogic authority, such as schools (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), an authority viewed by both those who impose the authority (such as teachers) and those who are imposed upon (such as students) as either neutral or of positive value. For Ted and his mum, whilst they were initially upset at Ted not being allowed to study A levels, they submitted to the pedagogic authority of the schoolteachers, in providing Ted with what they consider appropriate alternative qualifications. Ted and his mum's lack of academic capital meant that there appeared few options for him, and so followed the school's guidance, despite there being alternative educational routes available. Whilst Ted appears aware of an injustice against him, he conforms to the school's expectations by remaining there, but enrolling on the qualifications that they permit him to study. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) state that the strength of pedagogic authority varies both within and between groups. Its legitimacy is perceived as higher when there is a value given to the products of the pedagogic action. Both Ted and his mum value

education, and so submit to what they perceive as the legitimacy of the school's decision, what Bourdieu (1990b) calls "native compliance" (p. 68). Like Ted, Bowl's (2001) WP students "felt screened out of further academic opportunities because of assumptions made about their perceived failure" (p. 154). For Bowl's (2001) students, this was a complex mix of class, gender and race. For Ted, an undiagnosed learning difference and class aspects, such as a family unfamiliar with possible educational pathways, and relying on the school to make decisions on what was academically best for Ted, almost led to him being screened out of education at 17. Only his mother's apparently serendipitous discovery of the BTEC at a local college saved Ted's educational journey.

The school policy of only permitting students to study science A levels at Ted's school if they achieve a grade B or above in GCSE mathematics can be considered a form of symbolic violence. Typically, students from lower SES households do less well at GCSEs (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021), particularly boys (Cavaglia, Machin, McNally & Ruiz-Valenzuela, 2021). This suggests, therefore, that rather than a measure of natural ability, GCSEs are, in part, a measure of social class and gender. If these factors are not considered when making decisions about groups' and individuals' futures, there is social reproduction – those from lower SES families are less likely to gain the grades for entry to the more traditional level three qualifications that increase opportunities to attend selecting universities. As Archer et al. (2018) argue in relation to the similar concept of setting in schools, the pedagogic work of gatekeeping A levels in this way supports misrecognition of achievement of the GCSE grade of B in mathematics as natural ability. In reality, this form of gatekeeping can be considered a means of naturalising the dominance of middle-class students, thus maintaining social reproduction. Furthermore, the gatekeeping of A levels in this way and signposting to alternative (and in Ted's case, unwanted) qualifications is a means of seeking to maximise school position in league tables that use achievement as a means of measuring the school's success. Whilst not guaranteeing student success at A level, strict entry requirements may reduce risk to the school's league position. As Bourdieu

and Passeron (1990) argue, pedagogic authorities themselves may be unconscious of their acts of symbolic violence and misrecognise them as positive support. Nevertheless, the symbolic violence has real impact on students' future actions.

### **Decision-making about HE**

All three participants made the decision to apply for and attend university. For each, they were either first in family (Shea and Mathew) or first generation (Ted) to go to university. However, the ways that the participants made their decisions about applying for university were varied. Shea's decision-making process was like a planned journey; Ted's was a means of validating his academic abilities; Mathew was measured and made the move to HE on his own terms and to his own timescale. The decision-making process of the participants will be discussed in relation to two prevalent theories on how decisions are made about HE: RAT (Goldthorpe, 1998) and the use of hot, warm and cold knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998) to inform decisions. I consider RAT as government policy around choice of HEI is based on rational decision-making (BIS, 2016). Ball and Vincent's (1998) theory, in contrast, acknowledges the greater complexity of decision-making. These discussions will be informed through the use of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital.

Reay et al. (2005) identify that working-class families are often less able to support their children in HE decision-making; there is little in the familial habitus to draw on as capital in these decisions. Instead, such parents offer generic, emotional support, as identified by Shea, talking about support from her parents: "They're very encouraging, I'd say, like but, they don't, um, they don't know what I do." [S, 108-109]. It may therefore be that first-generation students are less able to make considered decisions on HE, as their habitus does not include knowing the HE 'game' and their grapevines for gaining hot knowledge are fewer. Yet Smith (2011) expresses the importance of that limited hot knowledge for students who have little experience of HE in their family. She describes the importance of intragenerational experience for non-traditional students, through witnessing siblings go to university, as a means of making the transition to HE a possibility (Smith, 2011). This is most

apparent with Ted, who bases his decision-making solely on his older brother's experiences.

Whilst marketisation of HE may lead to students with considerable cultural capital and a familial habitus of HE making considered decisions, first generation students must make such decisions based on limited knowledge (Smyth & Banks, 2012). It is, therefore, unsurprising that Ted relies heavily on his experiences at the university his brother attends. Ted's decision-making appears constrained by lack of cultural capital, focusing on the single university with which he has had any experience. Ted's decision-making most clearly demonstrates what Reay et al. (2005) call: "the interplay of strategic rational action with non-rational or non-utilitarian goals" (p. 32). Ted demonstrates limited rational action. His limited cultural capital around HE leads him to making a decision based on hot knowledge from his brother, aspiring to the case study university. He says, "I'd been over here to see my brother" [T, 160], but has little idea of where else to study if he was not accepted: "I'll just have to make do." [T, 165]. As part of the first generation of his family to enter HE, Ted uses what Smith (2011) calls an "intragenerational family script" (p. 173) to help his decision-making. For Ted, now that his brother has made it appear possible, the study university appears to be a place for people like him (Bourdieu, 1990a).

What individuals and society may perceive as rational decision-making may therefore be just that – a perception, rather than full agency. As Reay et al. (2005) argue, student decision-making is mediated through a complex process of "cultural and social capital, material constraints,... social perceptions and distinctions, and forms of self-exclusion" (p. 29). All three participants show evidence of these constraints, although for some, the constraints are more evident than for others. Shea's story appears to show the least evidence of constraint. She did very well in both GCSEs and post-16 qualifications, yet both the universities she was most interested in were post-92 universities. It is likely that with her mix of both A levels and a distinction in BTEC, Shea could have been accepted onto a course in a university higher in the stratification of HE, but she self-excluded. However, her desire to study a vocational course means that post-92 universities were

more likely to contain the course she wanted to study. Shea appears to have used cold knowledge (data) and warm knowledge (visits to universities) to help her decision-making, in finding the course that she considers best suits both her future hopes and her current needs. Students make decisions about attending a university they will feel at home in (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead, 2008); that is, where the personal habitus of the student and the institutional habitus of the university, or of a department within the university, are aligned. Shea made her decision specifically because of the small-scale, friendly and supportive teaching within the department, a replication of her experiences at school. She gained this information from visits, comparing it with the higher student numbers in a similar post-92 university. Shea therefore appears to use her academic capital to support her HE decision-making.

In contrast, like many working class and mature students (Christie, 2007), Mathew's options were geographically constrained. He showed no desire to attend other universities despite, whilst in sixth form, applying for a number of Russell Group universities across the country. As a mature student, now settled in the city, Mathew's "horizons for action" (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 34) are limited. Christie's (2007) study of spatial immobility in working class students notes how such students are restricted, and that for many such students, living at home and maintaining local social and employment connections can reduce the "inherent riskiness" (p. 2460) of HE. Mathew did not take the taken-for-granted straightforward journey from post-16 education to HE that many middle-class students do, as part of the familial habitus (Christie, 2009; O'Shea, 2015; Reay et al., 2001). Instead, he has made the active decision to apply to HE after being out of education, and to remain in the home city where his family settled.

None of the participants discuss the impact of qualifications on HE decision-making; that is, whether their mix of qualifications limited their initial decisions. This may well be because all had made the study university their first option. As a post-92 university, the study university can be considered less selective than the Russell Group selective universities (Britton et al., 2021). It accepts a wide range of qualifications, including students with a

combination of qualifications (study university Student Data Manager, personal communication, July 2020). Indeed, Ted is offered a place in spite of attaining a lower BTEC grade than his initial offer.

RAT appears to play only a minor part in decision-making, even for Shea. Rather, in addition to hot and cold knowledge, the participants' own prior experiences appear to have an impact. The role of habitus in HE decision-making has been explored in numerous studies (Burke, 2016; Reay et al., 2005; Smyth & Banks, 2012); as Reay et al. (2005) state, habitus allows for individual agency but within the realms of the possible for those individuals. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) highlight how habitus develops from initially an absorption of family values but can be further structured through school experiences, and other exterior socialisations; therefore, the habitus of individuals is not static but develops. In Ted's case, his family clearly values education, as his mother wants him to do better than she did: he knows he's "not stupid". However, experiences in a school that casts him as a failure leads, in part, to him adopting the role of disruptive student. Only once he attends college does his habitus and the organisational habitus of the college appear to align in a way that widens the possibilities of Ted's horizons. This experience highlights the importance of organisational habitus on individuals' experiences of education, and in this case, decision-making about HE. Like Hodkinson and Bloomer's (2000) explorations of the learning culture in a sixth form college, there are suggestions of different cultures within the pre-university educational experiences of the participants. Whilst Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) do not use the Bourdieusian term of 'institutional habitus', their study illustrates a sixth form with a strong institutional habitus of preparing students for HE. However, as Reay et al. (2001) note, where the personal and the institutional habitus are incongruent, tensions can occur.

Mathew's experiences can be considered through the lens of tensions between individual and institutional habitus, and this is supported by Hoskin's (2017) study. Several of the participants in Hoskins' (2017) study talk of the pressure from the school for them to apply to university; this suggests that there is reduced agency of individuals. Mathew experiences similar pressure from his school to apply for HE, and he remarks on the difference in attitude

between his school where he takes A levels, and the college, where he completes a BTEC. The two organisations have a differing habitus in relation to post-18 education, divergent in their culture and attitudes towards it. Hoskins' (2017) case study of students' decision-making in a single school highlighted that the organisational habitus of that school was one that encourages applications to university. She argues that this habitus may at least in part be guided by the role of progression statistics in school league tables. Hodkinson and Bloomer's (2000) study also identified that the academic ethos in the sixth form college in their study also guided students to apply for HE, even if the students were initially not considering it. Mathew's school may be similarly focussed, with its emphasis on university for A level students and work and apprenticeships for vocational students.

Schools may experience pressure to encourage students down particular routes, due to measures of performativity. For example, destination data forms part of measurements in school performance tables (DfE, 2019). This includes the numbers entering HE or higher apprenticeships (DfE, 2019). In Mathew's school, the organisational habitus appears to be encouraging students into HE. However, the encouragement appears limited to A level students and whilst ostensibly of benefit for the students, the tracking of A level students towards HE and vocational students towards apprenticeships pays lip service to WP but instead reinforces the academic/vocational divide. As Vidal Rodeiro and Williamson (2019) note in their analysis of destination data, students undertaking A levels are more likely to enter a sustained destination, particularly HE. This could be as a result of pressure to apply (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000; Hoskins, 2017). Whilst Hoskins (2017) herself does not use the term symbolic violence, the pressure from teachers for students to apply to university might be considered as such. The teachers in Hoskins' (2017) study acknowledge that it may not be what is best for the student at that time, but the organisational habitus of the school is that students apply to university. Similar to Hoskins' (2017) study, ostensibly encouraging application to HE for the benefit of the student, Mathew's school in reality may be applying pressure to students to apply in order to provide improved destination statistics. Mathew notices such pressure and succumbs

initially: “Like when I, when I was going to go to university the first time round after A levels, it was because the schoolteachers were pushing, ‘go for it’.” [M, 53-54]; the school appears to have high aspiration for him. However, later personal issues give him the opportunity to withdraw. Whilst the school’s organisational habitus may be such that it encourages students who might not have considered HE to apply, this does not explain the dichotomy in guidance between A level and vocational students. If the school was primarily concerned with WP to HE, it might be expected that information, advice and guidance on HE was also provided to vocational students. Instead, Mathew perceives segregation of guidance and the lack of encouragement given to vocational students. It is, as Bourdieu (1977) states, “the way things are” (p. 196) in that school. BTEC students may be at higher risk of failing to gain a place in HE, potentially affect destination data, and so are guided to alternative, safer, destinations. So, rather than Goldthorpe’s (2007) contention that educational establishments support the development of social mobility, they may indeed, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue, maintain social reproduction. For Mathew, a period of further level three study in an institution with a less pressured environment gives him the opportunity to consider his future and to enter HE at a time that is right for him, rather than right for the school.

Within the field of education, there is doxa surrounding the academic/vocational divide, what James (2010) calls “the social class-inflected differential valuing of routes and credentials” (p. 17). That is, there is the unchallenged assumption that this is how the world is (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and how it needs to be. In Mathew’s school, there is the doxa that students with academic qualifications, such as A levels, will go to university and those undertaking vocational qualifications will go into employment or further training. For the doxa to be maintained, the school impose symbolic force. Bourdieu (2000) describes symbolic force as power that acts directly on an agent, without the agent even perceiving that force, “but the magic works only on the basis of previously constituted dispositions, which it ‘triggers’ like springs” (p. 169). That is, it works through the habitus. Mathew’s familial habitus is not steeped in HE; however, the school’s institutional

habitus appears to be heavily steeped in encouraging A level students into HE; it is the taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1991) social structure. There is conflict there, but Mathew follows the guidance of the school, and he complies with the norm for someone with his level of GCSE attainment. The school may couch this symbolic force as supportive, but in reality, it is violence, reducing agency.

Decision making for both post-16 and post-18 qualifications is therefore a complex interplay of agency and being bounded by structure. Shea shows greatest agency in her decision-making. This is enabled through congruence between her decisions and the institutional habitus of her school. Ted's experiences are initially negative, with structural barriers such as school sixth form policy and lack of information about alternative providers, in addition to symbolic violence, limiting his decisions at school. However, after having to leave the school, by chance he finds an educational environment in which he can thrive. His decision-making for HE is limited by the little social and cultural capital he can draw on, relying on tacit knowledge from his brother and support from his BTEC tutor. Mathew's journey to HE was longer; his move from GCSEs to A levels was straightforward, but an apparent tension between his own desires and the institutional habitus of the school mean that he felt pressure to comply with their desires for him. At this point, it appears as though Mathew's agency is limited by the school's habitus. A period in an institution with a less pressured approach to HE application gave him the opportunity to explore his future path, and he makes the decision to enter HE in his own terms, although his decision about which institution to attend was limited by his need to stay local. Each participant's decision-making and journey to and through HE builds upon previous learning experiences and affects how they view themselves as learners. The final theme therefore explores the concept of learner identity.

### **Theme 3: Learner identity**

All three participants' narratives provide insights into each individual's perception of their own learner identities. Ted and Shea appear to define themselves by their post-16 qualifications; Mathew's learner identity appears a more complex mix of both educational and workplace experiences. Reay

(2010) defines learner identity as “the conceptualizations children have of themselves as learners” (p. 278). Whilst Reay talks primarily of younger schoolchildren, others have stressed that learner identity continues to develop throughout individuals’ educational experiences, including in school-leavers and in mature learners entering post-16 education or HE (Brunton & Buckley, 2020; Higgins, 2013). Reay (2010) acknowledges that the conceptualisations that learners have are intimately influenced by their interactions with others, including teachers and other learners. Identity as a learner is significant because it supports the development of a sense of belonging in the learning environment (Brunton & Buckley, 2020); such a sense of belonging is an important aspect of success in transition to and through stages of education (Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012). Indeed, Reay (2010) stresses the importance of school in creating a long-lasting learner identity: “No other public institution is as crucial for the development of the identities children and young people will carry into adulthood” (p. 277).

Learner identity is influenced by the educational institutions encountered by individuals. Shea’s school experience reinforced her vision of herself as a successful, academic student. Ted’s repeated battles with teachers strengthened the feelings of being undermined. Only at college, with an ethos of support, did his identity as a successful learner appear to start to develop: “Things like that, that helps me a lot. To learn. But I never got that in school.” [T, 192-193]. Mann (2008) argues that repeated interactions with educational institutions leads to individuals developing certain learner identities. Whilst many may develop identities as successful students, Mann (2008) also notes that some individuals may experience their identities “as undermined and excluded, and others as crystallised to counter the norm” (p. 81). Whilst Mann (2008) was discussing interactions in universities, such repeated interactions will also occur in schools; indeed, the length of such interactions is much greater in schools. Therefore, it could be expected that learner identities are formed throughout the schooling process. Yet that formation is fragile and can change.

Ted, in particular, demonstrates the evolution of his learner identity through his educational career. Ted’s learner identity was effectively fractured after

his experiences at school: "I was completely disheartened and didn't know what to do." [T, 42], to be gradually reconstructed during his time at college. Further confidence in his learner identity has developed at university, with the validation of his practical experiences, compared to A level students: "I could never, ever have thought that this BTEC I did was going to be that useful for me." [T, 85-86]. Ted's identity now appears to be solidly built on his BTEC experiences. Nevertheless, his anger over previous academic experiences suggests that the foundations of his identity remain shaky. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) discuss the important role of identity work, that is individuals "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" (p. 1165) their identity so as to maintain a level of identity coherence. They stress the increased importance of such work at times of change. None of the participants discussed issues with transition to HE, a key point of educational change. This may be because, as second years, their learner identities at university were settled. Yet their sense of identity still appears very much moulded by school experiences.

Whilst Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) work is based in business organisations, it can equally be applied to the participants. Shea's learner identity has developed from her positive learning experiences at school in both GCSEs and A levels. Her positioning as academic, in comparison to both family and to BTEC students, is reinforced by her privileging of examinations, contrasting this to the hands on approach of family and friends. Mathew's learner identity is more complex, based not only on school and college experiences but the wider experience of work; his positioning in HE is akin to a job: "I'm here for university, to get a degree" [M, 356]. He does the best he can and focusses on the academic work rather than 'play'. Mathew's learner identity appears more rounded than Ted's or Shea's, whose identities appear closely linked to their educational experiences to date. Whilst the nature of the participant interviews meant that prior qualifications were focussed upon, both Ted's and Shea's are replete with assertions of learner identity validated by external qualifications. They appear to have absorbed the discourses around the academic/vocational divide as a means of developing their identities.

Learner identity development is a social and contextual process. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) discuss how self-identity evolves through a myriad of interactions within an organisation, thus absorbing the organisational identity. Whilst they discuss self-identity in relation to individuals' experiences in business institutions, similar factors within schools and universities could have an impact on how students view themselves as learners. For example, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) discuss the role of messages produced by an organisation, and the language used, in both consciously and unconsciously developing self-identity. The messaging surrounding Ted's school experiences, from primary school to sixth form appears one centred on failure. Gee (2000) argues that organisations such as schools can imprint a "discursive identity" (p. 103) on individuals. Ted's schoolteachers interpreted Ted's lack of interest in the subjects allotted to him and his undiagnosed ADHD tendencies as misbehaviour. The teachers, according to Gee (2000) construct an identity for Ted based on this interpretation. According to Gee (2000), the subject of the discursive identity can take on the identity they are given by the organisation or can be passive in their reception of it. Ted appears to take on the identity, thus reinforcing the discourse. When he moves to college, the lecturer orients towards his learner identity in a more positive way taking the time to construct a more positive discourse and through additional support: "So he said, and that's why I don't mind sitting down and giving you the run down on how you could manage your time better, or whatever" [T, 416-418]. Ted's positive experience supports Gee's (2000) view that what some teachers consider a 'problem' child "may be recognised and oriented to as 'normal'" (p. 104) in a different context. For Ted, the change of educational institution gives the opportunity for a change in discourse around his learner identity. Higgins (2013) talks of the "positive push" (p. 185) that students coming from a NEET (not in education, employment or training) background valued when returning to training. Whilst Ted was not classified as NEET, his BTEC tutor was the source for such as positive push, where individual support increased his academic confidence and helped the development of a positive learner identity.

In contrast to Ted's negative experiences at school and the impact these had on his learner identity, Shea's school experiences appear on the surface to have been positive. However, there is complexity within Shea's learner identity. Her repetition of "we" when referring to A level students and "they" when referring to BTECs demonstrates a disconnect with her own qualifications. Shea's identity discourse is centred on her positive A level experiences; this is reinforced by her teachers, who appear to minimise the value of her BTEC. Indeed, Shea's apparent separation from her BTEC qualification is a form of exclusion. Laclau (1990) argues that identity is built on exclusion and "establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles" (p. 32). He notes that the pole mentioned second within the hierarchy is viewed as reduced, "as opposed to the essentiality of the first" (Laclau, 1990, p. 32). Laclau (1990) uses Derrida's example of man/woman as the two poles in identity. However, the idea can also be extended to academic/vocational hierarchies. Shea, for example, constructs her identity as an A level student, othering those who have studied BTECs, despite having studied one herself. As Hall (1996) argues, "identities can function as points of attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render outside, abjected" (p. 5). It appears, then, as though Shea may have abjected her BTEC experiences. I use abjection rather than rejection as her way of speaking removes herself from people who have studied BTECs. It is only through focussing on them as the participant interview progresses that she appears to begin to recognise that the qualification may have had some use: "I think, like I said, like BTEC, that was quite independent work, like, like I said – you go and do it and that's the same as here [university] really" [S, 320-321].

In contrast to both Ted and Shea, Mathew's learner identity does not appear to be closely tied to his previous academic experiences. Instead, his identity appears to relate more to his recent employment experiences, which he draws on in his academic work: "I've been able to draw out some real life examples that have been similar to what they're trying to teach" [M, 219]. According to Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) identity theory, then, Mathew is strengthening his identity. He draws on his varied academic and

work-based experiences to develop a learner identity based on his previous professional identity. This is demonstrated in the way he draws on feedback in his first assignment to revise his academic skills in line with the expectations of HE: “yeah, I’m definitely looking at the feedback”v[M, 291-292]. In summary, then, each participant’s prior experiences have helped to develop a unique learner identity, with its foundations in the habitus of the participants but also evolving through their interactions with education institutions and with employment.

Reay and Wiliam’s (1999) and Reay’s later review (2010) of work with primary school children in year 6 identifies the role of assessment in developing learner identities. Rather than being able to see their individual strengths, the learners focussed on what was being measured in their SATs as a means of describing their learner identities. Similarly, both Shea and Ted use their pre-university qualifications and forms of assessment as a means of describing their learner identities. Ecclestone (2007) notes the essential role of assessment as a force that shapes both learner attitudes and their dispositions to learning. These moulding forces are particularly strong, Ecclestone (2007) argues, at key points such as external examination points where students define themselves as good learners or as failures. The children in Reay and Wiliam’s (1999) and Reay’s (2010) study also saw their assessment as the start of a mapping process for their life; if they did not do so well in their test, they would ruin life chances and “be a road sweeper” (Reay and Wiliam, 1999, p. 347). Ted’s experiences of having to leave sixth form with no clear plan, and following his mum’s experiences of thwarted education, illustrates a similar concern for Ted and his mum about his education, a concern “not to waste [his] brain”. Ted’s learner identity up to his BTEC was one focussed around failure. However, this was not necessarily Ted’s failure in assessments, but rather his schools’ expectations of failure. That is, Ted’s learner identity appears to have been moulded by others’ expectations of him, with Ted learning to act up to these negative expectations. Only in a new learning environment, with a supportive teacher and with different forms of assessment, does his learner identity appear to develop in a positive way. Lange et al. (2015) refer to the impacts of the

negative learning experiences Ted experienced as “intellectual wounding” (p. 92), where learners internalise the messages from their educators. Despite such wounding, Ted maintains a strong sense of his own value, repeatedly rebutting the messages he received during his time at school. His success at BTEC and transition to university are vindication to him and give the opportunity to demonstrate that he’s “not stupid”. That he has to heal from this intellectual wounding of his learner identity, though, demonstrates the symbolic violence of the school.

Learner identities are strengthened through the decisions students make about their progression, particularly in relation to decisions over whether to study academic or vocational qualifications (Ecclestone, 2007). Again, school plays an important role in determining how students perceive their academic identities. All three participants’ schools appear to value A levels over vocational qualifications, albeit in different ways. In Shea’s case, this appears to have supported the development of an identity where she sees herself as an A level student, with BTEC students, and her own family members, being less academic. At Mathew’s school, there is the separation of student futures, with those with A levels being encouraged to university and those with BTECs into work and apprenticeships. Brockmann and Laurie’s (2016) study of vocational apprenticeship students identify “that rather than being naturally ‘practical’ learners, the young people were constituted as ‘non-academic’ in school environments that privileged the academic” (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016, p. 235). That is, schools may impose a discursive identity based not only on perceived behaviour of the student (Gee, 2000) but possibly also based on the institution’s perceptions of the qualifications that student is taking. Ecclestone (2007) notes the reinforcement of identity through both the act of deciding to study vocational qualifications, and also by subsequent interactions with their tutors. In Ted’s school, his discursive identity as “a little mess about” [T, 182], in addition to his identity as a vocational student, leads to his disengagement with learning and encouragement to leave. In contrast, his BTEC tutor at college recognises and connects with Ted. Ecclestone (2007) notes that learners in her study who had been removed from A level courses onto vocational ones saw vocational qualifications as second

chance, an identity reinforced by tutors who had experienced a similar academic history. Ted's tutor appears to do similar, reinforcing Ted's identity as a BTEC student, an identity firmly and proudly retained by Ted.

Yet, in spite of the participants' successes in transitioning to HE at their chosen HEI and their current positive learner identities, prior educational experiences do appear to have had some negative impact on participants' learner identities, certainly in the case of Shea and Ted. This can be considered another example of symbolic violence within the educational system. Shea's negative perceptions of a qualification that she herself undertook appear to be based on the perceptions of the school staff with whom she interacted. As previously discussed, staff minimised the work involved in the qualification, expecting Shea to complete it without teaching or support. Vidal Rodeiro and Williamson's (2019) study identifies that higher attaining students often hold the perception that vocational qualifications are low status. Shea's apparent internalisation of this viewpoint, reinforced by the school's approach, has led to her devaluing her own education. She appears therefore to abject it (Kristeva, 1982), to make continued sense of her identity as an A level student. The implicit institutional assumptions of the school on the value of the BTEC, recognised and internalised by Shea can be considered a form of symbolic violence. While ostensibly not affecting Shea's progress, symbolic violence around the school (and consequently participant) perceptions of BTECs may have led to a fractured identity of 'them' and 'us', in Shea's case. Only when encouraged to reflect on her BTEC experience during the interview does she start to acknowledge that the BTEC qualification she abjects (Kristeva, 1982) may have had some value.

In contrast to Shea's development of a learner identity based on her A levels, Ted's identity has been forged by his BTEC experiences. At school, since before his 11+, it appears that Ted has been labelled, through discursive processes (Gee, 2000) by his schoolteachers, as a failure. Ted's school appears to enact symbolic violence against him, enforcing what Ted considers to be arbitrary barriers against entry to science A levels. Ted himself also appears to have internalised the doxa of the lower value of BTECs until he himself experiences them. Like Ecclestone's (2007) learners,

he is transformed by this second chance, as is his learner identity, because he experiences academic success in his BTECs. A change of educational setting and a more positive discursive identity (Gee, 2000) with his tutor rebuild a positive learner identity. Yet, that Ted needed to rebuild his learner identity indicates that symbolic violence may be at play. There is the labelling of Ted as a failure because of his lack of interest in the qualifications he was managed into by the school. When one also considers previous teachers' narratives around his probable 11+ results, one can see that Ted's learner identity has been formed through negative expectations. Ted's relative success and clear interest in learning at both college and at university has developed in spite of previous learning experiences, rather than because of them.

### **A return to the research questions**

In this section I return to consider the research questions posed in the first chapter.

- 1. To what extent do participants perceive they had agency in their decisions about post-16 and post-18 education?*
- 2. How do participants feel that assessment methods have affected their post-16 and post-18 educational decisions?*
- 3. How do participants perceive that studying a combination of BTEC and A levels has supported their academic transition to university?*

Research Question 1: *How do the participants experience agency in their post-16 and post-18 educational decision-making?*

The participants' narratives indicate that at times, they do feel as though they experience agency in their decision-making, but that structures in the fields of education and government appear to have an impact on actual agency.

Furthermore, agency is not static – it evolves as the participants move through their educational career. This is most clearly seen in Mathew's case, where it is only after time away from education that he feels he can make the active decision to go to university. Ted most clearly has limited agency in his post-16 educational decision-making and only through serendipity

encounters the BTEC that gives him the opportunity to apply for university. Both Shea and Mathew appear to have greater agency at this stage, as their GCSE results conform to school requirements for their chosen qualifications. Bourdieu (2000) contrasts rational action theory's argument that agents are free to act in the way that most benefits them with the limitations of decisions being controlled only by external agents. For Bourdieu (2000), as for the participants, decision-making appears to be made within the bounds of the probable. For the participants, the probable is guided by their interactions with limited sources of knowledge. However, each participant uses the knowledge they have available in different ways, based on their own capital and habitus, and the habitus of the schools within which they studied, supporting Hodkinson and Bloomer's (2000) study of institutional habitus within different schools. In summary, the participants' experiences of agency are complex – all three participants' narratives around decision-making are embedded within a process that appears rational to them. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier when considering how the participants experienced decision-making, those decisions are constrained by structures such as individuals' habitus, their capital, and the habitus of the schools they attend. Further constraint occurs in the wider field of government control and monitoring of education, leading to a neoliberal field where schools are rewarded or punished based on metrics such as examination results. That the participants may only hazily perceive some of these constraints, primarily when structures are enforced upon them, demonstrates the hidden nature of the symbolic violence limiting agency.

*Research Question 2: How do participants feel that assessment methods have affected their post-16 and post-18 educational decision-making?*

Assessment methods have had a significant impact both on the opportunities available for the participants, and in their decision-making. This appears initially less important in Shea's decision-making, but it is clear by how she refers to her colleague's decision to take a more practical degree course that her own decision was at least partially guided by the 'academic' nature of the courses available. Examinations as a means of assessment have had a significant impact on both Ted's and Mathew's decision-making both post-16

and post-18. It is therefore important to acknowledge the impact that government policy around assessment, often based on doxa rather than evidence-based practice, may have on individuals' educational identity and career.

Through limiting much assessment at key educational points (16 and 18) to examinations, government policy may limit widening participation to HE that it purports to support. This is particularly so with government policy around the removal of BTECs (DfE & Williamson, 2021) and replacement with T levels, where articulation with degree programmes is less clear (Foster & Powell, 2019). For both Ted and Mathew, opportunities for HE may have been limited or even impossible without the alternative forms of assessment experienced in their BTECs. These findings support Vitello and Williamson's (2017) study of BTEC students. Although Mathew did change HE course to reduce the number of examinations he had to take, neither he nor Ted appear to have been disadvantaged in HE by their concerns over examinations, in spite of being partially assessed using this method. These particular combination students, therefore, do not consider themselves at a disadvantage at university, unlike the BTEC only students in Myhill et al.'s (2019b) study.

*Research Question 3: How have participants' experiences of studying a combination of BTEC and A levels supported their academic transition to university?*

How participants feel that their previous mix of qualifications has supported their transition appears intimately linked to their academic identity. Both Ted and Shea foreground the skills and knowledge from the qualifications they view as important to them. They also disparage the skills, or perceived lack of skills, attributed to the other qualification. Shea dismisses skills learnt in her BTEC as being of a low level; Ted considers A level students as not being able to work safely in a laboratory or write reports. In contrast, Mathew's wider experience of both a full set of A levels, followed by a BTEC and then work experience allows him, perhaps, to make a more measured judgement. Although he acknowledges the usefulness of his qualifications in his transition to HE, ultimately, he can also identify that the cultural capital such qualifications imbue is useful for entry to HE but for him, the capital

provided by experiences in work is now of greater value to his progression in HE.

The participants' lived experiences correspond with those of the combination students interviewed by Myhill et al. (2019b). Like the participants, these students felt well equipped for study at HE, in contrast to both A level and, particularly, BTEC students. Therefore, for the participants, a combination of A level and BTEC experiences provided effective preparation for study at HE.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter has drawn on the three superordinate themes developed from the participants' narratives and explored them in relation to the wider literature. It has considered how government policies, enacted by schools can limit agency in the participants, affecting their decision-making about post-16 and -18 education. Assessment, in particular, has had a significant impact on all three participants, in both their decision-making and the development of their academic identities. Being combination students has meant that they have all undergone (to a greater or lesser degree) a range of teaching, learning and assessment methods, and have experienced the utility of the qualifications to studying at HE. For each of them, in different ways, their prior educational experiences have supported what they perceive as successful transitions to university study. Finally, the chapter returned to the research questions posed in Chapter One, to demonstrate how the overarching themes answer the questions.

## **Chapter Six: Final considerations**

In the previous chapter I explored the participants' experiences of studying a combination of A level and BTEC qualifications, and how these have supported the transition to HE. I considered theories around decision-making, assessment and learner identity supported by the participants' lived experiences. The participants' voices, albeit indirectly through my interpretative stance, highlight the prevalence of doxa, misrecognition and symbolic violence within the field of education, particularly in relation to assessment and to the perceived differential values of academic and vocational qualifications. In this concluding chapter, I consider how the study contributes to what we already know about combination students, and how the study introduces new knowledge about combination students. The chapter will return to my reflections on my own experiences as first in family to university and as academic skills adviser, and how my own role can be seen as supporting the university rather than students entering HE. I also consider areas for future research in relation to combination students, particularly in relation to the changing post-16 vocational education landscape.

### **Becoming combination students**

The focus of this research has been students entering HE with an experience of a combination of both A level and BTEC teaching, learning and assessment. As discussed in Chapter Three, my initial assumption would be that students would make an active decision to study a combination of these qualifications. However, the participants in the study came to this combination in disparate ways, as other have found (Hutchinson, 2016; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). Although the participants recognised themselves as combination students when responding to the call for participants for the research, this recognition appears almost superficial. Instead, they base their educational identities on specific aspects of their academic career. It is therefore important to recognise that combination students are not a homogeneous group but they come to HE with a range of educational experiences. These experiences include being identified by previous

educational providers as unsuccessful, which could lead to them identifying themselves as such (Gee, 2000).

How the participants view themselves depends on the agency that they had within making the decision to become combination students. Although the level of agency the participants appear to experience differs, they are all limited by structure. This may be the structure of government policy, implemented by schools and universities, but also the “structuring structure” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170) of their own habitus, such as Ted’s decision to attend the university his brother attends. Shea’s decision to maintain the comfortable familiarity of a small, supportive learning environment, with more support from tutors also appears limited by her habitus. Yet her desire for a small, familiar course also maximises her opportunities for success. Shea constructs herself as neoliberal subject (Houghton, 2019) who strategically maximises gain in her decision-making. She contrasts herself to others, who make decisions such as to follow a vocational route – what Houghton (2019) calls the “neoliberal other” (p. 621). We can, then, see variations in agency, but with participants always bounded by structures, including previous educational decisions where they will have had little agency, such as schools attended and GCSE options.

### **Contributions to knowledge**

There has been limited research into the study of students taking a combination of BTECs and A levels. This research is original in that it gives voice to participants through an in-depth exploration of what it means to be a combination student and the impact that this has on decision-making and identity. Recent research, published since the commencement of this study (Myhill & Morris, 2019; Myhill & Venner, 2019) establishes that it is difficult to generalise the learning and assessment needs of students entering HE with A levels, BTECs or a mix of both. My own research explores in greater depth the lived experiences of students who have made decisions about taking a combination of qualifications, using IPA.

The study provides supporting evidence for the continued academic/vocational divide in English post-16 education, in spite of successive governments' policies around parity of esteem (Ofqual, 2018a). The participants perceived BTEC and A level qualifications differently. Shea, for example, clearly identifies A levels as academic and BTECs as practical, and for students less at ease with academic qualifications, even though she herself completed a BTEC. She uses the dismissive term 'BTEC Barry' when asked about perceptions of BTECs and A levels, reinforcing the general perception of the public about the status of BTECs in relation to A levels. Similarly, Ted initially considered BTECs as qualifications for those who could not achieve A levels, for "stupid people", although his perception was changed by his BTEC experiences re-engaging his interest in learning. The participants' views, particularly Shea's, reflect what is known already about perceptions of vocational qualifications (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Hutchinson, 2016; Richards, 2016). Billett (2014) argues that the long-term divide between academic and vocational education is upheld by "privileged others" (p. 2), maintaining distinctions between different classes (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2001). Until this distinction is broken down by those in the powerful field of politics, vocational qualifications will continue to be perceived as having lesser status. Perhaps the badging of the new T levels as "gold standard" (Keegan, 2021, para. 2) will go some way to breaking down the academic/vocational disparity.

That there continues to be a disparity in esteem between A levels and BTECs is important. With BTECs being viewed as a qualification for lower achievers, it may limit it as a qualification that could be taken by higher achievers, thus perpetuating the disparity. For example, in Bowers-Brown's (2016) study, the school made judgements about suitability of different qualifications for pupils, with vocational qualifications "not seen to be for all pupils" (p. 60). As Bowers-Brown (2016) argues, this maintains inequality within the education system. It also maintains social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) as those encouraged to study vocational qualifications are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Henderson et al., 2016; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). In this way, the dichotomy puts limits on

the students who decide (or have decisions made for them) to study BTECs or a combination of qualifications by limiting decision-making around HE, such as where these BTEC and combination students can study.

Government demonisation of BTEC qualifications has led to significant changes to their prevalence and structure. Such changes include many being culled as part of actions relating to the Wolf report (2011), being amended to include external assessment (Ofqual, 2018a) and ultimately many being earmarked for removal (DfE & Williamson, 2021), replaced by “gold standard” (Keegan, 2021, para. 2) T levels. Yet T levels cannot be studied alongside other qualifications in the way that BTECs of differing sizes can. This therefore reduces students’ decision-making to the binary of academic or, as the T levels are labelled, technical qualifications (rather than being defined as vocational), “primarily aim[ed] to support entry to employment in a specific occupational area” (DfE, 2022, p. 5) with articulation with degree programmes being less clear (Foster & Powell, 2019).

The Government themselves identify that, whilst some smaller vocational qualifications will remain, the significant changes to vocational/technical education will impact certain groups and reduce the opportunities for those groups (males, students from Asian ethnic groups, students with special educational needs (SEND) and/or those from disadvantaged backgrounds) to enter HE (DfE, 2022). Instead, the impact review commits to “exploring” (p. 16) how to support the students in progression to level three qualifications or into a “higher quality route into employment” (p. 16) but at level two, rather than a level three course that could subsequently act as an alternative route to HE. The Government’s own impact assessment therefore identifies that its vocational education reform policy is reducing routes to HE for WP students. This could increase social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) by funnelling many students in the groups outlined above into as yet unidentified routes into employment at 16. The route previously available to the participants in this study is therefore being limited and the academic/vocational dichotomy is being reinforced through government policy.

A second claim of this study is the role of assessment in reducing individuals’ agency and in reinforcing social reproduction. The previous chapter

considered how government policies on education and assessment, implemented by schools, and monitored through marketisation measures such as school league tables, have a significant impact on many aspects of the participants' post-16 educational experiences. With the older style BTEC qualifications taken by the participants, there was an alternative, non-examination-based means of entering HE. With recent changes to BTEC assessments, this means has become more difficult for students who struggle with examination-based assessment. Indeed, the Government's own impact assessment of current changes to level three qualifications (implementation of T levels and reduction in other vocational qualifications) acknowledges that the changes will limit progression: "some students currently studying at level 3, may not be able to do so in the future" (DfE, 2021, p. 9). The combination route, as a heterogeneous route into HE, then, may have a limited future.

The study raises awareness of the role of doxa such as end of course examinations being the best means of determining knowledge. The participants' perceptions of their experiences with assessment before transition to university has helped to highlight that government policy privileges assessment by examination. Those qualifications that are assessed by examination and are considered academic are classified as gold standard in policy, although gold standard appears to never be defined. Anderson (2012), for example, seeks to find the source for this term but is unable to. 'Gold standard', then, could be considered a form of policy narrative (Ball, 2021), a narrative providing an apparently rational justification for a policy; in this case, the policy of removing qualifications that do not meet this undefined standard. Those qualifications that are more vocational and assessed using a range of methods, including significant teacher assessment, are considered 'low quality' and are being removed, thus perpetuating the academic/ vocational divide that Myhill and Venner (2019) find unhelpful. The decision over which BTECs are removed is ultimately a political one. As Willetts (2021) states, government ministers claim that removing most BTECs is for purposes of quality; however, Willetts (2021) argues that "Instead it is all to do with forcing students either to do A-Levels

or T-Levels and eliminating anything else” (p. 37). There is little chance that students, particularly those more able, will freely make decisions to study a combination of qualifications when one form of qualification is perceived as of lower quality, and the alternative makes such a combination impossible.

Yet there appears to be little questioning of the move to increased use of external examinations as the main form of assessment of both pre- and post-16 qualification. The government’s pedagogic action of enforcing greater external assessment by examination is reinforced by the pedagogic authority of schools and colleges, forced to comply through neoliberal measurements of achievement and success (Ball, 2021). For future students who, for whatever reason, cannot demonstrate their knowledge and understanding within examinations, the implementation of greater external, examination-based, assessment in both BTECs and in the new T levels will have a significant impact on decision-making. This, again, limits agency in decision-making for such students and reinforces social reproduction.

My study also contributes to greater understanding of how combination students make decisions around post-16 and post-18 education. Within this study, Bourdieu’s (2000) concepts of doxa and symbolic violence have been used to illuminate how government policies, particularly around assessment, affect the participants’ decision-making. By highlighting the taken-for-granted assumptions around assessment and also school support in decision-making, the study adds to knowledge around agency in decision-making and structural factors that can damage learner identity.

The participants’ experiences support much of the work already published around decision-making for HE. For example, much of Reay’s work on working class (and often first generation) students moving to HE (for example, Crozier et al., 2008; Reay, 2004b; Reay et al., 2005; Reay et al., 2010; Reay, 2018) focuses on the transition of such students to elite universities, such as the Russell Group. She finds students showing discomfort and being ill-at-ease in their universities. Reay’s work stresses the role of habitus in these feelings of incongruency, with the students at odds with the organisational habitus of the elite universities. For the participants of this study, first generation to go to university, although they may be what

Reay (2018) calls “the marginal within a marginalised section of the HE field” (p. 10), their decisions are made with pragmatism. In contrast, then, to the neoliberal theory of RAT, where students should look to attend the highest status university that they can, to maximise return on investment, these combination participants look to make bounded decisions based on “what people like them do” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 17).

The study also adds to an understanding of the impact of prior education experiences on the learner identity of the participants as combination students. Each participant’s experiences has moulded their learner identity in unique and nuanced ways. Using IPA as the methodology, with its focus on the individual and on ways of expression as well as content (Smith et al., 2009) exposes how the participants’ lived experiences have moulded their perceptions of themselves as learners. The participants’ narratives indicate that they do not identify as combination students but rather take their identities from their academic experiences. This is particularly true for Shea, who abjects (Kristeva, 1982) her BTEC experiences, and identifies as an A level student. Assessment is a key aspect of both Shea’s and Ted’s learner identities, though less so for Mathew, who also has wider experiences to draw on. This study therefore highlights the importance of assessment in forging a positive or less positive learner identity for the participants. The study supports Reay and Wiliam’s (1999) and Reay’s (2010) research on primary-aged children on the impact of assessment on learner identity, extending it to combination students’ experiences post-16 and in HE. The perceived impact of examinations is important because government policies on assessment, such as the increase in end of course assessment by examination, may have a significant influence on the learner identity of students which in turn can affect transition to and through future stages of education.

### **Professional implications**

The findings of this study have a number of practical implications. The research identifies that a combination of teaching, learning and assessment

experiences has given the participants a positive transition to university, in spite of limited familial experiences of HE. This information is of use for educators working in HE when considering methods of assessment for modules. As both this study and Myhill and Morris's (2019) study identify, a range of assessments is beneficial for HE students, so that the HEI supports and develops the heterogeneous student population's assessment skills.

The number of students entering HE with a mix of qualifications is increasing (Richards, 2016; study university Student Data Manager, personal communication, July 2020). I have identified that this increase is at times in spite of advice and guidance from schools rather than because of it. For both schools and universities, the study highlights the role and impact that institutional habitus may have on students such as the participants. This affects the students' decision-making, particularly for those students who may be first generation to apply to university and who rely on the school for advice and guidance. This study's exploration of the structural factors affecting decision-making may prompt staff supporting post-16 educational decisions to consider what is best for the student, which may be a combination of qualifications, rather than what might be best for the institution's achievement data. It may also prompt universities to acknowledge the wide range of experiences with which the diverse student population enter universities.

### **Limitations and future directions**

The major limitation of this study is the limited number of participants. Even within the three participants' narratives, there were considerable differences within how they came to have studied a combination of qualifications, and even what was meant by studying a combination of qualifications. However, as IPA privileges the in-depth lived experiences of individuals and does not look to generalise, this limitation could instead be seen as a strength. Whilst the idiographic nature of the data is not generalisable, the narratives of the participants may highlight factors that can reduce agency not only for combination students but other students, particularly those who are first

generation to university and those whose performance in examinations does not necessarily equate to their academic ability. The study adds weight to other studies exploring the experiences of combination students, by providing in-depth perspectives from the participants. Only by highlighting taken-for-granted assumptions can we move forward to consider how to develop practice to reduce their impact. This research is one step in highlighting such inequalities.

Another factor that could be considered a limitation is the interpretative nature of IPA as a methodology. Through necessity of word count, I have had to limit the themes explored within the thesis; these themes are, by nature of the methodology, those that appear of importance to me. Other researchers, with other lived experiences, may privilege other themes. Yet, through supporting the themes with extracts from the participants' interviews, I have embedded the participants' experiences within the themes in order to justify my decisions and provide context for the reader.

With recent changes to BTEC assessment to include at least 40% external assessment (UCAS, 2019), it would be of interest to explore how combination students who have undertaken these updated BTECs perceive how assessment through examination has impacted upon them, and how they perceive this external assessment has supported their transition to HE. Another aspect of research in combination students would be to gather data across a wider cohort on how such students come to enter university with a mix of such qualifications. I had assumed that the participants in this research would have made an active decision from the start to study a combination of qualifications. Indeed, Richards' (2016) research suggests that schools were starting to encourage students to take a mix of qualifications. Yet all three participants experienced the combination of qualifications in a unique way. Further research into how this growing group of students makes the decision to study a combination of qualifications may aid schools in supporting students to make the best decisions for them.

## **Looking back: A reflection on my own journey**

In Chapter Three, I considered my own role within the research and how my own educational and work experiences inform and infuse the research. I return, briefly, to myself in this final chapter, to consider how the research has informed and infused into my own practice.

My own experiences as first in family to enter HE, and as being in a liminal position in the HE environment informs my analysis of the participants' experiences. It allows me to co-construct with the participants' experiences, an informed view of how the participants have navigated the complex landscape of post-16 qualifications and transitioned to university. The research is situated within my understanding of both the post-16 and post-18 education environment, the experience of being first in family to enter HE, and my professional position now as a source of support in navigating the transitions to and through HE. The research is the participants' lived experience seen through the lenses of my own lived experience.

When I initially proposed this research, I sought to consider how well combination students felt that their academic skills, developed by both A levels and BTEC, had supported their academic transition to university. This was reflected in my initial research questions and my interview schedule. Where the participants led me was to a deeper, more complex, and fascinating exploration of how external factors affect decision-making and even identity. IPA as a methodology allowed me to interpret the participants' words, but also the way they used those words, to understand what was important to them. My prior expectations, both around how they came to study a combination and also what the focus of the research would be, changed. As Jauss (1970) argues, I initially had a "horizon of expectations" (p. 21). The hermeneutic circle used in IPA to move between part and whole, between participants' experiences and the wider literature, throughout the process of research, analysis and writing, led to Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" (as cited in Kimball & Garrison, 1996), between the participants experiences and my own understanding.

I have also reflected more widely on the experience of both this research and the wider Doctorate, in relation to my professional practice. As an academic skills adviser, I am on the boundary between the students who come to us for support, and the academic organisation. My role is to act as an interpreter, helping the student to understand what is expected and how to demonstrate their understanding in a way that is acceptable to academic expectations. This research has forced me to consider my role, and how it can be considered problematic in perpetuating the organisational habitus of the university through a hidden curriculum of academic writing requirements, whilst problematising the student. Whilst my role is to help the student identify and navigate this hidden curriculum, my role is still to encourage compliance to a cultural arbitrary. As I reflected, I noted that students often apologise for not knowing how to structure an essay or how to reference; those who apologise often preface their apology with 'I did a BTEC' or 'I did an Access course'. I have had no students apologise for wanting support because they'd done A levels, although many of the students we see will have studied A levels. This in itself demonstrates symbolic violence in action; the students have taken on the perception that their qualification is inferior and do not question it but instead accept it as the way things are. I always stress to the student the strengths of the skills that they demonstrate by having completed qualifications such as BTECs. However, my job then moves to initiate the student into the culturally arbitrary ways of demonstrating knowledge in HE. I find myself, then, enacting symbolic violence on the students I purport to support. My role is to reinforce rather than to liberate. With a recent focus on decolonising universities (Richardson, 2018), perhaps there needs to be consideration not just of decolonisation of curriculum, but also of assessment (Jacobs, 2020) where, perhaps, the voice of the academic skills adviser could become partner to students in their assessments, rather than transmitter of culturally arbitrary expectations.

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# Appendices

## **Appendix A: Participant Information sheet and participant consent form**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

#### **How second year undergraduate students feel that studying both A levels and BTEC level 3 qualifications have prepared them for the academic skills needed at university**

You have been invited to take part in a research study. The information on this sheet explains why the research is being done and what is involved; please do take the time to read it carefully and discuss it with others if you would like to. If you have any questions about the study or would like more information, please contact me.

**Thank you for your interest.**

#### **Background to the study**

A considerable amount of research has been conducted investigating the academic move from A levels to higher education and from BTEC qualifications to higher education. There has been less research looking at how students experience the move to higher education having studied both A levels and BTEC qualifications together.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study will explore how second year undergraduate students who have completed both A level and BTEC level 3 qualifications before coming to university feel their qualifications have helped prepare them for academic study at university. This study is part of my Doctorate in Education at the University of Chester.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

If you are a second year undergraduate at University of Chester whose UCAS entry qualifications were a mix of both A level(s) and BTEC level 3 qualifications, you can take part in this research.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you do not have to give a reason; you will not be contacted again. If you do wish to take part, you can withdraw at any time during the study if you change your mind.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

1. Email me at [s.hopkinson@chester.ac.uk](mailto:s.hopkinson@chester.ac.uk) so that I know you are interested. We will arrange a convenient time to meet for an interview at a University of Chester campus most convenient to you, during normal working hours. I will ask you to sign a consent form to show that you agree to take part.
2. There will be one single interview of around 60 minutes during which I will ask you questions about the study topic. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped so that I do not need to make lots of notes whilst talking with you.
3. I will send you a typed copy of the interview transcript, for your information.
4. When I have completed the study I will send you an overview of the findings, if you are interested.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can ask questions at any point. You can also withdraw from the study at any point, without having to explain why.

### **What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?**

It is unlikely that the research topic will make you uncomfortable. However, you can stop the interview at any point if you feel you want to. If you are harmed by taking part in the research, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed through negligence, there may be grounds for legal action but you may have to pay legal costs to bring such an action.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The research study is small scale but the information could be used to help further improve academic support for all students moving into higher education at University of Chester.

**Will my taking part in this study be confidential?**

Yes - if you take part in the project you will remain anonymous. If you take part, your name will not be recorded on the interview notes and no identifying information will be disclosed. Your responses to the questions will be used for the purpose of this study only.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results will be written up into a thesis which forms part of my Doctoral course. It is hoped that the findings may be used to improve support for students moving from school and further education to higher education. You will not be identified in any report or publication.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education and Children's Services. Postal address: University of Chester, Riverside Campus, Castle Drive, Chester CH1 1SL.

**Who may I contact for further information?**

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact: Sharon Hopkinson (email [s.hopkinson@chester.ac.uk](mailto:s.hopkinson@chester.ac.uk); telephone: 01244 511164).

**Thank you for your interest in this study.**

## Informed Consent Form

### How second year undergraduate students feel that studying both A levels and BTEC level 3 qualifications have prepared them for the academic skills needed at university

This consent form is to make sure that you understand the study, that you are aware of your rights and that you are happy to take part in the study. When you have read the Participant Information Sheet, please carefully read this form and then, if you are happy to, fill in each part where you are asked to do so.

Please circle as appropriate

1. Have you been given information about the research? **YES** **NO**
  
2. Do you understand what you are being asked to do? **YES** **NO**
  
3. Have you been informed that you may approach the researcher at any time with any questions you might have? **YES** **NO**
  
4. Do you understand that you can withdraw from the study at any time prior to its conclusion? **YES** **NO**
  
5. Do you understand that all information you give will be treated as confidential? **YES** **NO**

I understand that the research will be conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) and both the Data Protection Act (1998) and General Data Protection Regulation.

I agree that I am happy to take part in the study and that I understand all the above.

I agree that I am happy for the interview to be audio-taped.

I agree that quotations from any discussions may be used in the final report. I understand that this will be done anonymously.

I acknowledge that any reports written during the research will be made available to me for inspection, if required.

SIGNED..... DATE.....

PRINT NAME.....

CONTACT NUMBER.....

THANKYOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION

**Sharon Hopkinson**

**Tel: 01244 511164**

**Email: [s.hopkinson@chester.ac.uk](mailto:s.hopkinson@chester.ac.uk)**

**Beswick 010/2**

## Appendix B: Interview prompt questions

### Interview prompts

Separate prompt sheet with lists of typical academic skills

#### General questions

- What GCSE grades do you have?
- What qualifications did you take 16-18? What subjects?
- Was this in a school or a college?
- What course are you studying now?
- Does your course at university follow on from these qualifications, or is it in a separate subject area?
- Has anyone else in your family been to university?

#### Choice at 16

- What did you hope to do prior to finishing your GCSEs – did your GCSE results change your plans or did you start off by wanting to study the topics you did study at 16-18?
- Why did you decide to study both A levels and BTEC at age 16?
- Who helped you decide what qualifications to take? For example, school tutors, parents, friends, others...
- Did anything or anyone restrict your choice of subjects e.g. availability at school, thoughts on what you would do after you left school
- Can you recall your expectations/feelings when choosing at 16?

#### Choice of uni

- Did you expect to go to university when you made your BTEC and A level choices?
- Do you think your choice of A level/BTEC combination affected your uni choice in any way?

#### Academic skills in BTEC/A level

- What types of ways were you taught and assessed in BTEC?
- How does that compare to how you were taught and assessed in A levels?
- How do you think A levels have prepared you for studying at university?
- How do you think BTECs have prepared you for studying at university?
- If there were differences in how you were taught or how you studied, how did that make you feel?
- Did you feel one way was better than the other? If so why? And how does this relate to your study at university?
- Overall, do you think you benefitted or lost out by studying both? Why?

#### Academic skills at uni

- How did you find the transition in relation to subject content rather than academic skills?
- Do you feel there was a straightforward move to university with regard to academic skills or do you feel that it was a big step up? Why?
- To what extent do you feel that the university course builds on BTEC experience?
- To what extent do you feel that the university course builds on A level experience?

- To what extent do you feel that your previous educational experience is valued on HE course?
- How did you feel about your academic transition to uni? For example, when you had your first assessments to do and perhaps when you got feedback on your first assessments
- Are there academic skills you've found easier or more difficult? How do you think this relates to your prior study experiences?

What is your perception of how A levels are viewed by others?

What is your perception of how BTECs are viewed?

What's your own perception of the two qualifications?

## Appendix C: Extract from Ted's transcript analysis

Line	Speaker	Transcript	Analysis	Notes	
210		page and all this stuff. So it was like a research paper but like I didn't do well in it because I didn't want to do it, you know. That's my issue, so... But then in technology there was practical and exam as well; and then, um, the other one was mostly theory. The engineering one was mostly theory.	Didn't do well because I didn't want to do it; <b>that's my issue</b> Practical and exam Mostly theory	Not interested/motivated – lack of agency	<b>SH Sharon Hopkinson</b> But is it his issue? Is it not the issue of the school, bouncing him into qualifications that he didn't want to do?
215	I	OK. Do you think anything in your AS levels... I know you didn't enjoy the experience, but do you think any of that helped you prepare for studying at university? So, coming here and the things you've had to do here?			
	T	Ah, no [emphatic]. I would not say my AS levels had done that. I would say the college, for sure.	Ah no. Would not say not. The college for sure.	Emphatic that school did not support preparation for uni. Brings back to the college, even though not prompted <b>today</b> so.	
220	I	Right. OK then. So thinking about that, how did the BTEC prepare you for the things you've had to do at university? You've touched on this already with your research study...			<b>SH Sharon Hopkinson</b> Vocational qualification giving a specialised form of capital – immersion in and understanding of lab-based culture, transferrable from BTEC directly into degree.
	T	Yeah, uh, scientific writing methods, simple lab techniques. Cos I was always in the lab. We did our work in the lab, we did our theory in the lab, so I was always in the labs. So I always, you know, I would know not to do things you, know in a lab. And things like that, and I see people now and see them walking about the lab with, like, their ponytails hanging out and stuff and I think, 'you shouldn't be doing that!' you know. But maybe they didn't... maybe they're not that strict about that at school? I don't know. But, it's prepared me in the fact that the assignments are very, very, very similar. Layout, very similar layout. And the help I got as well. Because my tutor, he's got two PhDs, he's been to university for a long, long, long time. He knows how it all works, how university works. So he taught me how he learnt at university. Do you know what I mean? So that's...	Always in the lab In the lab, in the lab Would know not to do things... I see people now and see them... You shouldn't be doing that. Maybe they're not so strict at school Assignments are very, very, very similar; tutor has two PhDs, been to university a long, long <b>long</b> time; Knows how it all works Taught me how he learnt	Repetition of in the labs – stressing his experience, his embedding in the culture of science/degree Again, demonstrating <b>understanding of lab culture!</b> Contrasting self with others without that lab culture Comparing school with college negatively – reinforcing own experience/superiority in lab culture Repetition to stress similarity and <b>uni</b> -based experience of tutor Insider knowledge (hot/warm <b>knowledge?</b> )	<b>SH Sharon Hopkinson</b> Othering A level students – those without the knowledge of lab culture
225		... So what sort of things did he...			
230	I	Um, just like, just like his... [long pause] <b>There were no exams, for starters</b> . I know I have exams here, but like the coursework here is the main thing, I reckon. And um, he just showed me how to write stuff properly, and how to, like, lay stuff out. I know it sounds trivial and stupid, but that's stuff I never learnt at school. You know? Like practical stuff, especially, I mean I was taught aseptic techniques, you know. Just things like that. But, ... yeah... I'm just trying to think... [long pause]. I suppose, um... there wasn't a uniform or nothing like that and I don't know if that would have an impact on, like... You know, it wasn't like a school setting and it wasn't like, so strict. From the fact that, like, I was told that I had to do this by this by this, and it was a lot more lenient. The fact that I had deadlines on coursework that I could get extensions on – I couldn't do that in school. I tried to do that, because I have migraines as well, unfortunately. Like when I get a migraine I'm out for a couple of days. And it's... I had a lot of migraines because when I get stressed I get a lot of migraines; at exams times or a lot of coursework and I get stressed and I get migraines. And in school that was just... too bad for me, unfortunately. And it's not like I'm making all this up because I've been seeing a neurologist for... since I was six or seven years old. And it's like, I've had... I've given them that many documents supporting that,	No exams. I know I have exams here but... <b>CW is the main thing, I reckon</b> <b>He showed me, write stuff properly, lay stuff out, never learnt at school</b>	Minimises role of exams in something that he enjoys; whilst maximising them in school. - Unlike his school teachers Sounds trivial and stupid – but it's the hidden curriculum	<b>SH Sharon Hopkinson</b> Asked about how his tutor supported him., he starts with a structural difference between A levels and BTECs.
235					
240			Wasn't like a school setting, not so strict Do this by this; more lenient Deadline extensions – not in school I tried to do that When I get stressed Exam times or a lot of CW – stressed Too bad for me	Unlike in school where he was often "written up on the system" [180].	<b>SH Sharon Hopkinson</b> Hidden curriculum/academic capital
245				Returns to lack of support in school again	

## Appendix D: Extract of Ted's table of themes

Ted: Identification of themes

Theme	Evidence	Line	Key words
Gatekeeping	Prevented from doing his choices	24	Wasn't allowed
	Anger at closing off of avenues	117	I wasn't happy, I was angry
	School policy	119	that was just their policy
	Maths GCSE results	125	Because of one stupid exam
Failure	Failure in post-16 education		Failed big time
	Disheartened		Completely disheartened
	Not smart enough	69-70	That I wasn't smart enough to do science at A levels, but I'm now at university
	11+ exam	132	I'm gonna fail it, I'm gonna fail it, and that's it, I'm gonna fail
	Authority putting up barriers	135	Telling me I can't
School 'choices'	No advice on alternatives	75	no support from like my school
	Not interested in forced choices	199-200	just it wasn't something I wanted to do
HE choice	Warm knowledge – FE college (mum)	47-48	She was – we'll have to look at alternatives
	Hot knowledge – HE (brother)	164	my brother was here
	In contact with FE tutor	105	I send him, he sends me stuff all the time
	This uni specifically	159	I wanted to come to this one specifically
	No thought of other choices	165	if not, any other university is fine. I'll just have to make do
Exams	BTEC no exams	49	And no exams, all coursework based
	Does not like exams	351	I hate them
	University mostly coursework	233	like the coursework here is the main thing
BTEC as preparation for HE	BTEC as mirror image	85	it is pretty much a mirror image
	Usefulness of BTEC	85-86	I could never, ever have thought that this BTEC I did was going to be that useful for me

## Appendix E: Ted's Super-ordinate themes

<b>Super-ordinate theme</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Agency in educational choices	Gatekeeping
	School 'choices'
	HE choice
The impact of assessment on Ted's experiences	Exams
	BTEC as preparation for HE
	Transition
	Teaching and learning at school and college
	Teaching and learning at university
The role of support	Lack of support
	The contrast of college support
From failure to validation.	Failure
	Perception of BTEC
	Proselytising
	Second chance

## Appendix F: Extract from master table of themes for the group

<p><b>A. Agency in choices</b></p>	
<p><i>Choices at 16+</i></p>	
Ted: just it wasn't something I wanted to do	Line 199-200
Mathew: I didn't have any limitation.	16
Shea: I just... went to the same school. I thought it was easier	44-45
<p><i>Choosing HE – head or heart</i></p>	
Ted: I wanted to come to this one specifically	159
Ted: if not, any other university is fine. I'll just have to make do	165 159-161
Mathew: I was very much set on [university city] was my home and I want to stay in [university city], so I will apply to [case study university].	321-322
Shea: the course I chose and the reason why I came to [university] is cos it's a small cohort.	
<p><b>B. The impact of assessment</b></p>	
<p><i>Exams – the 'academic choice'</i></p>	
Shea: so they've put an examination element within it, I think it might increase that, kind of,... skill base of actually knowing what you've been taught	405-407 418
Shea: So it's worked out for her, and she's more of a practical person anyway.	
<p><i>Exams as a barrier</i></p>	
Ted: Because of one stupid exam	125 351
Ted: I hate them	70
Mathew: I don't thrive well on exams	97-98
Mathew: anything that can... er can be... assessed on a project, I would always take that over an exam	