

**Conceptions of Widening Participation and Non-Traditional
Students in Higher Education**

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ABSTRACT

Research into widening participation has considered both the barriers to participation and the experiences of 'non-traditional' students in higher education. However, less attention has been given to the meaning of widening participation and 'non-traditional' students for those working within higher education settings. This study explored the different conceptions of non-traditional students held by staff in a new university through an examination of responses to widening participation policy and the representation and management of diversity in the student population.

The study employed a case study strategy which utilised an ethnographic method, with documents, meetings, discussions and a series of interviews being the principal sources of information. It was informed by a critical perspective that drew upon theoretical conceptions regarding the inclusion of minority groups.

Key findings related to the divergent perspectives and varying meanings attached to the term 'non-traditional student' and the influence of the 'business case' in the local interpretation of widening participation policy. Different understandings of the need to develop the academic skills of non-traditional students and confusions around dealing with dyslexia were raised. Evidence was also found of contradictory pressures impacting on lecturers' approaches to diversity and attitude to support. Student empowerment was largely found to be based on ideas of economic improvement although there were some examples of lecturers taking what could be viewed as empowering approaches in their teaching practice.

Recommendations were made regarding the need for greater specificity when defining students and their support needs. Consideration was also given to the training and staff development required for lecturers to promote inclusivity and fully recognize the positive potential of diversity in the student population.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|---|
| CSJ | Commission on Social Justice |
| DfES | Department for Education and Skills |
| DfEE | Department for Education and Employment |
| DSA | Disabled Students' Allowance |
| ESRC | Economic and Social Research Council |
| FEI | Further Education Institution |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HEFCW | Higher Education Funding Council for Wales |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| HELOA | Higher Education Liaison Officers Association |
| HESA | Higher Education Statistics Agency |
| IER | Institute for Employment Research |
| IIGSHF | Independent Investigation Group on Student Hardship and Funding |
| NCIHE | National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education |
| NSSC | National Statistics Socio-economic Classification |
| RAE | Research Assessment Exercise |
| SCoP | Standing Conference of Principals |
| UUK | Universities UK |
| WAG | Welsh Assembly Government |
| WAP | Widening Access and Participation |

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The focus of study

The primary focus of this exploratory investigation was the different conceptions of non-traditional students and widening participation that were presented within a new university. In particular, the study posed questions regarding the identification of those students who were seen as 'non-traditional', the understandings of their needs and the perceptions of their integration within the university. It also explored the actions undertaken as a result of widening participation and the challenges that staff experienced in responding to diversity. Although closely related it was not a study of widening access per se. Rather, it explored the implementation of widening participation policy and the assumptions made about non-traditional students in the specific context of a new university in Wales.

The term non-traditional student, despite frequently being ill-defined in the policy literature (Woodrow, 2001), is commonly understood to refer to those students who fall into categories that are underrepresented in the higher education population. Although there is some regional variation, UK policy has shown a concern to both increase the overall number of people accessing higher education and to widen participation to underrepresented groups (Tight, 1998; Thomas, 2000; Thomas et al., 2005; Shaw et al., 2007). This policy objective of widening participation has frequently been presented as promoting equality of opportunity and as liberating individuals through greater economic independence. However Leithwood and O'Connell (2003:600) also argued that a 'homogenized and pathological' conception of the 'new' student exists in policy discourses amidst concerns about non-completion and lowering standards. Thus, within the literature regarding widening

participation policy, both the definition and perception of the non-tradition student is contested.

The active role to be played by institutions of higher education in managing widening participation has been made evident in requirements to meet access performance indicators for higher education and by the invitation of Funding Councils to submit widening access and participation strategies. Support for access initiatives has also been provided through funding allocations. Although such incentives are important widening access and participation policy implies far more than simply creating the structural conditions for entry (e.g. through compact arrangements with schools, franchises with further education colleges, Summer Schools and ‘taster sessions’). Spedding and Gregson (2000:5), for example, argued that, in terms of barriers to access, it is not the case ‘...that structural deterrents are the only factors in play’ and Thomas (2001) saw the institutional culture as critical in determining whether an institution would be flexible and willing to embrace diversity. Also, commenting on those studies that focus on monitoring the participation rates of underrepresented groups, Scheutze and Slowey (2002) argued that higher education's contribution to achieving greater equality should not be obscured by an over concentration on statistics relating to increasing numbers. In addition to access figures they see a need to consider the implications of a more diverse learner population within institutions. This need to look within universities was also recognised in a series of ‘horizon scanning’ papers looking at higher education research priorities to 2010 in which Connor (2003:59) saw a greater emphasis being placed on the question ‘wider access to what’?

The majority of those studies that have considered diversity within higher education institutions have tended to focus on the experience of students themselves (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Bowl, 2001; Reay, 2003; O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007). Whilst this is an important area of consideration it was not the objective of this research. Rather, the present study focussed on the reception to and representation of widening participation within a specific institution and stemmed from a particular interest in exploring the assumptions and practices that informed the meanings given to widening participation and non-traditional students.

1.2 Research interest

The relative lack of attention given to this issue of the meanings ascribed to widening participation and non-traditional students within higher education was an important impetus for the study, but it was not the sole stimulus. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the idea for the study and an interest in the general area of widening participation research arose from both academic reading and personal experience. This personal experience provided the basis of my 'repertoire of interpretations' (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000:250) and a key aspect of this was my background of being the first person in a working-class family living in a low participation neighbourhood to attend university. This background provided an interest in debates surrounding the widening participation agenda. The interest was accentuated when, in a discussion with other university lecturers, I realised that in addition to the three categories of being 'non-traditional' already mentioned (i.e. first generation, social class and neighbourhood) could be added that I had attended an under-performing school and (in later years) was a part-time student and single-parent. I was quietly surprised to realise that I had been quite as 'well-qualified' as any other non-traditional student.

Another relevant experience involved an early occurrence in my lecturing career when a colleague, talking with a group of other staff, ridiculed a group of female students and mimicked their accents, implying they were not very intelligent. I remembered the episode as the accents in question bore a striking resemblance to my own. Such instances, together with an initial career in social work and disability, have fuelled an interest in issues of exclusion and inclusion and the construction of difference.

In addition to these academic and personal interests, occupying a middle-management position within a new university in which widening access is a key objective provided a professional concern to gain further understanding of its reception within the university. Furthermore, such understanding was seen as necessary to enhance both the policies and practices of the university.

1.3 Method of study

Trowler (1998) raised questions regarding whether research based on interviews alone was sufficient to access the complexities of higher education and its 'multiple cultural configurations' (Alvesson, 2003:177) and argued that insider, participant research based on multiple methods of data collection were necessary to access the taken for granted understanding that is not put into words. An interest in uncovering the specific meanings operating within a local institutional setting led to the employment of a case study strategy utilising an ethnographic method, with the principal data sources being documents, observations and a series of interviews. Data was collected and analysed between May 2005 and January 2007.

As a key aim was to study the meanings given to widening participation and non-traditional students within a specific context there was a general commitment to an inductive approach. However, although a level of open-mindedness was required it was almost impossible not to have some ideas regarding the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The conceptual framework that informed the study, in addition to being based on an appreciation of insider, qualitative, case-study, also drew on an understanding of the socio-political context of widening access to higher education and interpretation was aided by theoretical ideas regarding the inclusion of minority groups and the notions of 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984). This knowledge offered a resource for interpretation and, thus, rather than taking a purely inductive stance, a critical ethnographic approach (Ball, 1994; Carspecken, 1996) was adopted.

1.4 Organisation of the thesis

This initial introduction has provided an outline of the study's central focus and method and has offered an insight into the reasons for the investigation and the origination of the researcher's interest in the research topic. The major purpose of Chapter 2 is to convey an understanding of the context in which widening participation and greater diversity of the higher education student population is being promoted. It also explains the understanding of policy implementation which informed this study. Chapter 3 considers related studies of student diversity in higher education, including investigations of the composition of the student population, attitudes toward entering higher education, the experiences of non-traditional students and the different responses and attitudes toward widening participation and diversity in the student population. In Chapter 4 a number of ideas regarding access policy approaches and the inclusion of minority groups are presented to signpost the theory

which informed consideration of the study's findings. Chapters 5 and 6 provide details of the methodology and the specific research method and process by which the study was undertaken. A discussion of the findings of the study in relation to both the stated research questions and theoretical ideas is offered in Chapter 7 with final conclusions and recommendations made in Chapter 8.

Chapter 2: The context: promoting student diversity in higher education

2.1 Introduction

...bringing education to people who in the past were excluded from it allows more people to realise their potential. Educated people are more fulfilled people. More fulfilled people are likely to make for a better society. (Warwick, HELOA Annual Conference, February, 2001)

Sentiments such as those spoken by Diana Warwick, Universities UK Chief Executive at the HELOA annual conference, together with arguments about economic competitiveness, are frequently used to publicly explicate a commitment to widening participation and inclusion in higher education. Successive governments, managers of higher education and academics have all claimed such a commitment (NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 2000; WAG, 2002; DfES, 2006). A willingness to influence change in the demography of UK higher education also appears to be substantiated by the existence of a large number of initiatives designed to remove barriers to access and some evidence of growing numbers of previously underrepresented groups now entering higher education (UUK and SCoP, 2005). However, there is still limited understanding of how lecturers and others in higher education settings perceive and manage an increasingly diverse population and how they receive the mandate to widen participation. In short, the effect of the implementation of more recent widening participation policies requires further investigation.

Such an investigation begins with a consideration of the nature of those policies promoting an increased diversity in the student population of higher education. This Chapter provides an outline of the major ideas put forward by higher education widening participation policies, the economic imperative underlying such policies and their reliance on a discourse of individual responsibility. Policies promoting the

participation of non-traditional groups across the UK are commented upon and, given the location of the study, policies of the WAG are highlighted.

2.2 Defining underrepresented groups

Expansion of participation in post compulsory education has been a recurrent theme in UK education policy (Tight, 1998; Thomas, 2000). In the late 1990's the push for expansion was presented in three significant reports, namely, the Fryer report, the Kennedy report and the Dearing report (Fryer, 1997; Kennedy, 1997; NCIHE, 1997). Each report identified a diverse range of groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. However a lack of specificity in defining what is frequently termed the 'non-traditional' student was evident in a number of policies. Those groups identified as 'non-traditional' in political documents have included the unemployed, ex-offenders, those on low incomes, older adults, those from socio-economic groups III to V, disabled people and specific ethnic minority groups. Woodrow (2001:9) emphasised this confusion when stating:

...we are jumbling up young people from low-income backgrounds, ethnic minority groups, refugees, single parents, unemployed people, women returners, those who are rurally isolated and so on, into a single category under the collective label of 'non-traditional'.

2.3 Policy initiatives

Despite some continuing ambiguity about the 'non-traditional' student, the intention to make post-compulsory education more available to a new constituency of learners was developed in subsequent reports and supported by considerable funding. In some cases particular groups were singled out for funding. For example the 'Excellence Challenge', announced by David Blunkett in September 2000, provided an extra £150 million to be spent over three years to improve access to Higher Education for '...bright young students from poorer backgrounds....' (DfEE, 2000:1). The strategies

advocated in this document included recruitment of admissions staff, ambassadors for schools and colleges, open days, summer schools, clearer information, better marketing and extra financial help for bright young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In recent years such strategies, largely pre-entry, have become commonplace whilst possibly less attention has been given to diversity issues post-entry, apart from a concern with the higher withdrawal of non-traditional students (IER, 2003).

Alongside, and within, widening participation initiatives a significant policy construction has been the individualisation of higher education participation. As an important part of the government's economic and social justice agendas opportunities are provided and individuals are expected to access them in order to develop their potential and contribute to the economy (Leithwood and O'Connell, 2003). This has led to ideas, frequently carrying a commitment to social justice, also being deeply individualistic and implying that life chances are solely determined by ability and effort. Although, as Avis (2000:185) commented, the presence of different potential interpretations of widening participation at least allows '...space for radical intervention'. Nevertheless the centrality of individual responsibility is woven through such political programmes.

Individualisation -- requiring the individual to invest in their own development lies at the core of New Labour's competitiveness agenda. Individual self-development is thought to promise economic competitiveness. Gone is the recognition of structural relation and the way in which these are accentuated through race, class and gender. (Avis, 2000:187)

Emphasis is accordingly placed on the private, with public benefit presented as a secondary consequence of private, individual gain. This is supported by discussions

referring to 'fulfilled people' (akin to that in the Warwick quote at the beginning of this review) becoming increasingly commonplace owing to a political shift in ideas.

The individualisation apparent in many government proposals on widening participation can be viewed as an illustration of an ideological transformation whereby elements of social policy are framed in such a way that they purport to promote economic modernisation through the active participation of citizens in those opportunities that are made available to them. Such thinking was evident in the Commission on Social Justice (CSJ), an initiative of John Smith, which Ellison (1998) argued was a useful device for presenting ideas that effectively moved centre-left welfare ideology toward elements of Conservative policy. The CSJ (1994:97) saw the '...economic high road of growth and productivity ...also [being] a social high road of opportunity and security'.

After Tony Blair became leader this economic rationale for social justice could be found in numerous proposals, his stated belief being that

...social cohesion - a society in which there is not gross inequality nor the absence of opportunity for a significant number of citizens - is an indisputable part of an efficient economy (Blair, 1996:116).

In accord with this the role of the state becomes one of offering opportunity rather than direct provision. Although not a view subscribed to by all Labour politicians, Gewirtz (2000) has argued that New Labour makes a virtue of such a policy mix that is presented as pragmatically eclectic and a 'Third Way' between the socialism of the old Left and the market ideology of the New Right. The discourse of the Third Way attempts to reconcile social justice and economic competitiveness and thus makes '...learning ... the key to prosperity...' (DfEE, 1998). The language of the Third Way

thus presents social integration rather than redistribution as a cure for exclusion (Fairclough, 2001).

Whilst not denying the importance of the equity and enabling rationale to some parties, (more of which will be said later) the economic agenda being promoted often appears to be the more significant driver (Taylor, 2005). Wain (2000: 40), for example, has argued that whilst ‘gestures’ are made toward broader social and individual needs ‘...it is the economic/vocational agenda which dominates and which is followed up most vigorously in policy making and concrete action’. This agenda has developed a compelling discourse in which support is given to

...the familiar claims of (neo-) human capital theories and 'trickle-down' economics that economic 'growth' and prosperity for businesstranslate into well-being for individuals and communities. For the most part, meaningful public debate about these promises and assumptions has been successfully stifled by a steady flow of compelling rhetoric about competitiveness, productivity, and economic survival (Jackson and Jordan, 1999:1).

As such a form of 'ideological corporatism' may be promulgated, allowing the ‘...dominance of an effectively unified view of the world across different sectors and institutions’ (Dunleavy, 1981:7). This is supported by a commercial and managerialist discourse, which, over the last decade has effectively set the agenda by excluding alternative ways of conceptualising higher education (Fairclough, 1993; Ball, 1994). This dominant view is one in which the idea of individual responsibility for personal educational status (and, by implication, economic and social status) is central.

The publication of the White Paper ‘The Future of Higher Education’ in January 2003 further developed the political steer on widening participation, and pronounced that

higher education must expand to meet the rising skills needs of the UK (DfES, 2003). It made some effort to be more specific about key groups by stating that the social class gap between those who enter university and those who do not remained too wide. The White Paper saw the major expansion as coming through new qualifications including Foundation Degrees and through better links between schools and Further and Higher Education. The appointment of an independent access regulator was suggested to oversee access arrangements. This proposal, together with that of differential fees and the concentration of research grants in particular universities were some of the more controversial aspects of the White Paper. For example Will Straw, president of the Oxford University student union, argued access arrangements as proposed by the government amounted to social engineering that would harm the very students it sought to help. This argument was based on the contention that the requirement to meet quotas of state school students would leave those students who fill the quota being stigmatised as second rate (Straw, 2003).

2.4 The Welsh policy context

Following this White Paper the Higher Education Act 2004 received Royal Assent on 1 July 2004. The Act created a new office-holder, the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education in England and made provision for the majority of functions related to student support (which were previously not transferred) and responsibility for policy on tuition fees, to be transferred from the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to the National Assembly for Wales. Jane Davidson, Assembly Minister for Education & Lifelong Learning welcoming this move stated:

Devolution of these functions represents an exciting opportunity to build on our commitment to social justice – especially as regards widening access and establishing an even stronger HE sector in Wales. These remain our key priorities.
(WAG, Cabinet Written Statement, 2003).

This statement highlights the social justice dimension of widening participation policies that is cited alongside the objective of reducing a national skills shortage.

Whilst all four countries of the UK present widening participation in higher education as a policy goal there are variations in their policies and the associated widening participation targets. The WAG's strategic report 'Reaching Higher' presented a policy for the higher education sector in Wales to 2010 (WAG, 2002). Building on the 'The Learning Country' (WAG, 2001) it stated that the aim of higher education should be '...to sustain a learning society' (p.2) and, as such, its four main purposes should be to enable the fulfilment of individual potential, to increase knowledge development; to serve the economy and to serve society. In terms of widening access it saw Welsh higher education institutions '...progressively attracting more students from disadvantaged communities...' (p.4) with the proportion of young people from low participation neighbourhoods increasing from around 25-30% to 40-50% by 2010 (WAG, 2002:21). To achieve this it advocated a 'seamless' progression to higher education, the flexible delivery of courses, and a removal of barriers between further education and higher education. It also emphasised a more 'learner centred' approach to address challenges of student retention stating that those who were traditionally underrepresented '...frequently need higher levels of support than has traditionally been available' (p.9). Although this statement implies the need to bring non-traditional students 'up to standard' through additional support, a reassessment of teaching missions was also viewed as being necessary to respond to changing students' needs.

In August 2003 WAG announced a revision to its targets and a focus on students from the most socio-economically deprived parts of Wales - Communities First areas. The revised targets were for 'The percentage of all undergraduate new entrants to HE courses at UK HEIs and FEIs who are domiciled in the 100 Core Welsh Communities First areas to rise from 8.9% to 11.4%' (HEFCW, 2003a). Communities First areas are defined as the 100 most deprived wards in Wales (as identified in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation).

Apart from precise targets another significant difference in the Welsh context is the arrangements for Welsh domiciled higher education students studying in Wales. These students are eligible for fee grants that offset the additional fees they would otherwise be charged. Also there is some evidence that within Wales, at the highest level of government there was a feeling that Wales had some ground to make up in comparison to England. In 2005, in response to a question regarding budgetary limitations on Welsh students eligible for such fee grants the First Minister argued that as Wales was a net importer of students (importing 28,000 students and exporting 21,000 students) it was effectively subsidising the English system and that,

Insofar as English higher education tends to have more people from the relatively well-off classes going to university, by way of a kind of right of passage, we should be paying more attention to expanding opportunities for Welsh students to go to HE rather than subsidising that little bit of the English system (WAG, November, 2005)

The Learning Country 2: Delivering the Promise, published in April 2006 by WAG viewed higher education institutions as needing to '... use the opportunity presented by the new tuition fee regime from 2007 -- 08 to improve access from disadvantaged or underrepresented groups'. However this statement was tempered by the comment that 'Fairer access needs to be balanced with the need for our HE institutions to

achieve the status we desire for them as world-class centres of excellence' (para. 8.3, p.50). It may be questioned whether this statement presents a view that fairer access is incompatible with excellence, at the very least it reinforces the assumption that greater support is required when dealing with non-traditional students. Finally, The Learning Country 2 does repeat the widening access indicator referred to in the 2003 revision regarding the rise in entrants from Communities First areas.

As in England funding has been made available in Wales to support widening participation initiatives. The HEFCW provides such funding for widening participation both through the main teaching grant, in the form of a premium payment per eligible student, and through various other initiatives. The main targets of premium funding have been students from lower socio-economic groups and disabled students. In 2005-06 the Widening Access premium was £215 per student with eligibility derived from proxy measures for undergraduate students' socio-economic status. For 'students with disabilities' the premium level was £200 per student. Riddell (2005: 636) argued that such funding can potentially produce unwanted outcomes.

Premium funding for disabled students illustrates the type of perverse incentive which may be established through new public management regimes. Allocated on the basis of the number of students within an institution claiming the DSA, premium funding does not take into account the nature of the student's impairment, and therefore it is possible that institutions may be tempted to encourage students with less significant impairments to claim the DSA, rather than creating an inclusive learning environment which makes individualized support less essential.

In addition to premium funding, institutions receive an allocation to support widening access based on receipt of their widening access and participation strategy. The sector's performance is measured by reference to UK performance indicators published annually by HESA and WAG's widening access targets.

As indicated above finance has been recognised as critical issue in widening access to certain sectors of the population. The Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly Government have separately investigated the issue of student finance, giving rise to the Cubie Report in 1999 and the Rees Report in 2001. This latter report, on student hardship in Wales (Independent Investigation Group on Student Hardship and Funding in Wales, 2001), provided the impetus for additional funding for Access and Hardship programmes covering higher education and further education with money targeted at students from low-income backgrounds and additional support for mature students and those with childcare costs. The approaches to tuition fees, financial support and targets for widening participation illustrate some of the differences between the devolved governments of the U.K in their effort to improve access to higher education for underrepresented groups.

The foregoing discussion has shown that the widening access and participation policies of the UK governments, and in particular the Welsh Assembly Government, are aimed at influencing the diversity of students in higher education. The discourse of these policies and the strategies employed to ensure their implementation may also contribute to the public perception of diversity in higher education and the conceptions of non-traditional students held by academics and managers. However it is not only widening participation policy per se that influences the way in which widening participation is received within institutions. Such policy does not exist in a vacuum and other considerations must be taken into account to appreciate the environment in which greater diversity is being promoted.

2.5 Other contextual influences

Whilst changes, through widening participation, have been extensively promoted in policy and by particular funding streams it must also be recognised that such policies are advocated alongside a number of other changes in higher education. In particular higher education has witnessed the introduction of quasi-market systems aimed to achieve greater efficiency in the use of resources and greater responsiveness to 'consumers' of public service. Robertson (1997:88) captured some of the complexity of such change in his statement that,

Universities must now maintain standards despite attenuated resources; educate a more diverse range of students; introduce more flexible curricula, including new forms of learning delivery and assessment; teach and research more intensively; prepare students for employment more effectively; contribute to improved economic competitiveness and to local economic success; and replace public investment with the merchant's penny whenever they are able.

Isolating widening access policy can underestimate the impact of other practices and policies on its reception and implementation. For example, while the need to increase income allows premium payments to be an incentive to widen access the pressure to undertake high profile research and to publish competes with the access agenda. Johnson and Deem (2003) have commented on the contradictory pressures common to higher education institutions and how such pressures can impinge upon the status and identity of the student in higher education discourse. In a study of references to students made by manager-academics they concluded that although policy emphasises the student, institutional responses frequently focus on resources and the time implications of increased student numbers.

Significant increases in the student population together with the greater volume of activity devoted to quality assuring the output of higher education are undoubtedly impacting upon institutions and those who work in them.

The opportunity presented by “massification” to promote inclusionary pedagogic practice in higher education has been overshadowed by the pressure to a) teach vastly increased numbers of students on less money and b) produce the right kind of evidence of effective teaching. (Malcolm and Zukas, 2000:1)

Watts (2000) noted the fundamental difference between the system of higher education at the start of the new millennium and that operating when lecturers themselves were students. The professional dominance of lecturers has been influenced by a free market discourse and consumerist ideology. Undoubtedly there has been a shift of power away from academics with such moves as greater casualisation, the introduction of discretionary payments and weakened collective bargaining. Supporting the view of decreased academic power Halsey's (1992:146) study of the British academic profession in the early 90s saw a trend toward proletarianisation with a diminution of ‘...prestige, salaries, autonomy and resources...’. This ‘decline of donnish dominion’ (Halsey, 1992) was seen as arising from two principal sources, firstly the financial and regulatory concerns of managers, and secondly from students’ consumer status providing them with increased power (Dearlove, 1997; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005).

Chandler, et al. (2002) in a study of the impact of the ‘New Public Management’ in English universities found many staff concerned that expansion was being achieved at a significant cost to both themselves and their students. They further cited Davies and Holloway's (1995:11) contention that ‘...cuts, together with an increase in throughput, certainly intensified workloads and put staff under considerable stress...’. Chandler et al. noted that many staff, whilst appreciating the need for change particularly in terms of including students from previously underrepresented groups, resented the way management was implementing changes. They also argued that the

largely individualised responses to stress amongst the academics that they observed was partly due to the undermining of collegiality by a number of factors. One such factor was the feeling amongst some academics that resistance could seem elitist and could appear to support an unpopular traditional model of higher education. Also mechanisms such as the RAE and subject reviews had encouraged competition between staff rather than a collegial approach.

In 1989 Wright predicted that greater diversity in the student population would bring problems around the curriculum, the relative power of stakeholders and the nature of academic outcomes and their achievement. In terms of stakeholder power in particular Wright saw academics as previously having exercised 'collegiate power' and having been able to define both consumer needs and the most appropriate means of meeting them. He predicted that the changes necessary to respond to the requirements of a mass-market would be experienced by many academics as '... profoundly depressing and threatening: they will see it as one in which the academy will be subjected to vulgar and demeaning demands' (Wright, 1989:103).

It has been almost 20 years since Wright's prediction regarding academics' response to changes in higher education. It is likely that such responses will vary according to the configuration of requirements placed on academics and managers operating in different contexts. Managing greater diversity is one such requirement and the contention that this will be affected by local contextual influences implies a certain understanding of policy implementation.

2.6 The interpretation of policy in context

Recognition of the various influences acting upon the implementation of widening participation policy challenges the rational-purposive model of policy implementation that frequently underlies the presentation of policy by governments and managers (Trowler, 2002). This model assumes coherence of policy and congruence between the goals of implementers and policymakers. An alternative understanding of policy informed the current study, one that appreciated that

... policy is also 'made' as it is received in different locales (sometimes with loss or fuzziness in parts of the message), interpreted and implemented. It is made too as practitioners go about their daily business, whether they are aware of it or not, as current practices, sets of attitudes and assumptions are realised in specific contexts of practice. (Trowler, 2002:3)

Individuals' ideas regarding their role in operationalising and promoting the tenets of any policy are shaped by personal interest and perceptions of the policy and its relevance to their own situation. Thus any evaluation of the impact of policies promoting greater diversity in the student population is likely to require a multifaceted approach that focuses on a specific context in order to take account of the complexity and 'secondary adjustments' (Riseborough, 1992) that occur within that context. An appreciation of policy as both text and discourse (Ball, 1994) was seen as aiding such an endeavour and a brief comment will be made on this before concluding this section.

Viewing policy as text demands that the importance of policy interpretation and the key gatekeepers in localised settings is recognised. A wide range of elements can influence local implementation and outcome and, '... the enactment of texts relies on things like commitments, resources, practical limitations, co-operation and (importantly) intertextual compatibility' (Ball, 1994:19). Therefore it was recognised

that enabling non-traditional students to ‘realise their potential’ and become ‘more fulfilled people’ may be compromised by other agendas that impact on the higher education experience. Equally important, as Ball also highlighted, is an understanding of policy as discourse in order to be aware of the importance of what is not said or done or cannot be said or done, i.e. to recognise the limits on the construction of possibilities. This conception recognises the importance of dominant discourses and ‘regimes of truth’ --such as notions of individual responsibility for personal educational status and education as remedying deficit.

These ideas will be discussed further in Chapter 4 when the theoretical concepts that informed the study are presented. Before this an overview of empirical studies concerning widening participation and promoting diversity in the higher education population is provided.

Chapter 3: The evidence of student diversity in higher education

3.1 Composition of the Student Population

Information on the composition of the student population in higher education institutions has frequently been sought to inform policy construction. The Dearing Committee recognised the lack of consistent data regarding students in higher education and commissioned studies on access for students from lower socio-economic groups and students with disabilities (Robertson and Hillman, 1997), and on ethnic minorities and women (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997). Robertson and Hillman's evidence to the committee showed that there had been a substantial shift in the participation rate of both working class and middle class participants. However the incremental growth in numbers was greatest for the middle class. Ross (2003:73) viewed this pattern of recruitment as having major significance.

In the past, first women, and then minority ethnic group members, were largely excluded from higher education. Both categories are now much better represented in higher education as a whole, albeit rather unevenly across the various institutions and subjects in higher education. But the disproportionate recruitment of middle-class students, and the parallel comparative exclusion of those from working-class origins, remain.

As previously stated the 2003 White Paper highlighted this continuing disparity, however, as Ross implied, overall numbers are only part of the story. For example, although women now participate at the same overall rate as men there are subject specific differences in the relative representation of women and men. Similarly, although the proportion of students from minority ethnic groups in higher education exceeds their age group as a whole there are important variations within this. There is an unequal distribution across subject areas, and different ethnic groups are not evenly represented (Gilchrist et al, 2003). Notwithstanding these provisos it does

appear that, when considering underrepresented groups within higher education more limited inroads are being made with regard to social background. According to Iannelli (2007), despite a remarkable expansion in participation, social class differences remain. However, Gorard (2005) in a study of participation rates in Wales noted that, in proportion to prior attainment and entry qualifications, social classes and ethnic groups are equally represented and thus it is attainment level prior to university that is the critical issue. He also claimed there have been limited changes in access in recent years.

The most substantial improvements in relative odds for the less advantaged social groups took place between 1970 and 1980, and then every year from 1989 to 1993. Whatever the problem in the current situation is, it is now better than it was historically, but the odds of participation for the less advantage groups have not improved since 1993... The longer term historical and social trend towards educational equity since 1944 has stalled (Gorard, 2005:9)

Whatever influences application and eventual access rates they are used to provide a yardstick for universities. The HESA annually publish general indicators providing comparative data on the composition of the student population and the performance of institutions in relation to widening participation. The figures published in 2006 (for the academic year 2003/4) showed that in Wales 17.3% of young full-time undergraduate entrants were from low participation neighbourhoods (calculated via postcodes), compared to 14.4% for the UK. 28.9% of young full-time undergraduate entrants were from the four lowest socio-economic groups (taken from the NSSC), slightly higher than the UK as a whole with 28.7%.

The Welsh funding council has often commented on the success of its widening access initiatives. For example, by reference to figures published in December 2003, it was stated that ‘The number of young entrants from underrepresented groups on

part-time courses in Wales has leapt from 23 per cent in 2000 to 33 per cent in 2001 - well above the UK average of 20 per cent' (HEFCW 2003b). The selective nature of such statements is quite obvious and Stroud (2001:7) also warned to treat Welsh claims regarding the effectiveness of widening participation measures with caution, noting that '...it is possible that Wales's socio-economic base means it naturally acquires more 'non-traditional' students -at least of Welsh students'.

3.2 Attitudes, Motivations and Risk

Whether access initiatives are having any effect or not, investigations into the demographic profile of universities inevitably raise questions of how any disparity in the recruitment of different social groups can be explained and a number of studies have sought such explanation. Several studies concern attitudes, motivations to enter higher education and the risk associated with doing so (Archer et al., 2003). For example, after undertaking a survey of social characteristics and attitudes to higher education Gilchrist et al. (2003) used multinomial logit regression to develop a model of potential higher education participation. Fourteen explanatory variables were identified as potential predictors of plans to enter higher education. Two modelling exercises were undertaken, one for the 16 to 18 year old age group and one for 19 to 30 year olds.

In their analysis of the 16 to 18 year old group the most significant social characteristic was prior educational qualifications with those with better qualifications being 7 times more likely to-apply to university. Although this sample was limited to the lower middle class C1 and working-class grades C2, D and E the model still showed a systematic social class gradient with C1 respondents being 3.8 times more likely than others to apply. Other influential factors were mother's

encouragement (5.8 times more likely), friend's encouragement (2.7 times more likely) and access to information about universities (2.9 times more likely). More powerful indicators in the model subsumed the influences exerted by age, gender and ethnicity. In terms of attitudinal indicators two registered strong effects. These were that those indicating a preference to earn money were 27.2 more times more likely to not plan to enter higher education and those with sufficient confidence to believe they were capable of passing a degree were 12 times more likely to apply.

The 19 to 30 year old respondents provided a somewhat different set of indicators. Social class was no longer statistically significant (although the study was limited in terms of the range of social class groups as previously indicated). Prior qualifications were still influential (5.3 times more likely), as was mother's encouragement (3.0 times more likely), but friend's encouragement was no longer influential. Attitudinal factors appeared to have a greater influence for this group. A preference to earn money and confidence in ability was still significant if not as strongly as for the 16 to 18 group. For this group of respondents those indicating a preference to earn money were 5 times more likely to not plan to enter higher education and confidence in ability meant they were 9.3 times more likely to apply. Additionally for this group a belief that they could better themselves and a reported enjoyment of study were significant (11.1 and 10.6 respectively). Also competing responsibilities were significant, with those not seeing this as a problem being 2.7 times more likely to apply.

The researchers recognised the essentially exploratory nature of such modelling, but highlighted the potential importance of particular factors in recruitment to higher education. As they stated in their original paper

It is notable that several of the influences are concerned with confidence and self-belief, and attitudes and motivation towards university study. While this combination of educational values and commitment may be the norm in more middle-class contexts, it is not typical among potential entrants from socially deprived backgrounds, where opportunities are more limited for the development of educational ambitions and where the intrinsic value of a university education must compete with more pressing material priorities. (Collier et al., 2003:261)

In another phase of the same research project Archer stated that the most commonly cited motivations to study of working-class respondents were those of ‘... improving personal and familial economic situations and gaining social status and prestige’ (Archer, 2003:123).

This may be unsurprising given what has already been discussed regarding the promotion of participation in education. Clearly the primacy given to economic and instrumental motivations reflects the dominant political rhetoric, although Archer reported that in addition to the personal benefit of participation the ability to support the family was an important factor. Also Reay’s (2003) account of a qualitative study of 12 mature working class women and their transition to higher education asserted that the process of doing a degree rather than the outcome was prioritised by all 12. This orientation is seen as particular to mature working class students, as is their commitment to ‘education for its own sake’ and the desire to contribute to society. Reay cited Bhatti’s (2003) study of working class graduates as also showing the ‘need to care’ as a major motivating factor. Thus the dominant discourses of individualisation do not appear to correspond well with the aspirations of some non-traditional students. Reay explained this by arguing that although the women are caught up in contemporary processes of individualisation ‘... such processes are both ameliorated and framed by an overreaching sense of, and commitment to, collectivity

and “the common good” (Reay, 2003:306). More congruent with individualisation, and more damaging as a result, is the propensity, shown in the study, for working class students to shoulder the responsibility for their own failures even when they are significantly influenced by factors outside the individual’s control (e.g. finance).

The possibility of failure is an important risk factor for working-class respondents and a fear of non-completion is based upon such factors as:

...experiences of prior educational failure, racism, time and financial constraints, ...qualification routes, ... family and a social demands and responsibilities, and personal feelings of deficit in relation to institutional cultures (Archer, 2003:132).

Thus, failure to complete is viewed as involving both social and personal costs as well as economic. The notion that working class students may feel deficient in terms of the culture of the university was of some significance to the present study.

3.3 ‘Fitting in’ – cultural differences

In addition to the potential risk of failure the working class respondents in Archer’s (2003) study gave other reasons for higher education participation not being worthwhile. Firstly the value of their degrees was questioned as they saw only lower status institutions as accessible. This, for some of those participating in HE, according to Archer, resulted in certain psychic costs as it confirmed a notion of what is acceptable for ‘people like us’ and thus reflected and reproduced their disadvantage. Reay’s interviewees confirmed this with one, Carly, questioning whether she will ‘fit in’ with what she perceives as the best universities. Regarding this Reay (2003:310) noted the ‘...disjuncture between working class habitus and the elitist field of the pre-1992 university sector’. In contrast, during admission procedures at least, the women she interviewed saw a number of post -1992 universities as more welcoming places

where they would 'fit in'. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) also found young people from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to apply to new institutions.

Bowl (2001:152), in a paper describing the experiences of three mature black working class women, stated how the women's accounts of university study show a picture '...of people struggling against financial poverty, lack of time, tutor indifference and institutional marginalization'. She also showed how these students appeared to blame themselves when expectations are unclear and how

Overall, the onus seemed to be on the students to adapt themselves to the institution and its rules, rather than on the institution and its main players to adapt in response to the fresh perspectives which participants brought with them (Bowl, 2001:157).

In Bowl's study of mature working-class students as presented in her 2003 book 'Non-traditional entrants to higher education -they talk about people like me' the difficulty students experienced in terms of the academic culture and conventions is made apparent through their own stories. In general students' perceptions indicated that although social exclusion was being addressed by policies of widening participation this was only in a limited way. In other words non-traditional students may experience a situational location within higher education but do not necessarily experience a social and cultural location within higher education. Difference is still acutely felt as they are faced with a culture that is alienating and confusing. Bowl's study also showed a particular failure to recognise and utilise links between the students own experiences and curricula. Curricular content was reduced to theoretical constructs and opportunities for empowerment were thus not taken, even on programmes where empowerment and oppression were key components (such as social work). Also assessment requirements were often implicit and students from

non-traditional backgrounds frequently felt inadequate for not understanding what was expected of them.

Archer (2003:133) also commented on working-class students being ‘...disadvantaged by dominant institutional cultures that position them as Other’ and Skeggs (1997:130) has described the middle-class standards she felt she was measured against at university and ‘found wanting’. Archer and Leathwood (2003) have commented on the ways in which the middle class transformative ideal of higher education participation is resisted by working class participants, but, despite such strategies of resistance, institutional cultures appear to remain unchanged.

Empirical data on disabled students entrance to, and experience of, higher education highlights similar issues of cultural difference and limited institutional change. Tinklin and Hall (1999) and Riddell et al. (2005) found disabled students’ early experience of higher education problematic and compounded by physical restrictions that made it harder for them to socialise with others.

In a review of widening participation research, Gorard et al. (2006) identified a number of barriers to the integration of non-traditional students. In summary, these were concerned with financial issues, social isolation, living at home, and conflicts of identity.

It thus appears that although factors such as those identified by Gorard et al. (2006), combined with the risks and personal costs of entering higher education, undoubtedly constitute barriers to access and integration, constraints may lie not only in the applicants’ circumstances but also in the culture of the institution and the attitudes

and actions of those responsible for the delivery of higher education. In addition to studies focused on the participation, engagement and experience of non-traditional students themselves, a less extensive body of research has considered the nature of responses to increasing diversity within universities.

3.4 The response to diversity

One aspect of the response to diversity concerns the content of universities' strategies regarding widening participation. Gibbs found that only 35% of English HEIs '...made explicit reference to their widening participation statements in their teaching and learning strategies' (HEFCE, 2001, para. 57). Since this study further studies indicated that although progress has been made in a number of areas there is room for additional changes in learning and teaching (Gorard et al., 2006).

Whether there is any need for specific measures for disabled students within these strategies is contested. Whilst Avramidis and Skidmore (2004) argued against this on the grounds of inclusion Hall and Healey (2004) maintained that simply devising general policies around teaching and learning and assessment for disabled students sometimes fails to meet specific need. They argued that the heterogeneity of the group means that no one solution will be appropriate for all disabled students. However they also identified some evidence of resistance from lecturers creating barriers to learning, such as not allowing the tape recording of lectures.

It has been noted that any response to diversity in the student population will inevitably be influenced by the contextual aspects of higher education. Thus Lyons (2006:333) remarked that,

Government policy (e.g. QAA, RAE) has created a culture of compliance in some HEIs as identified by Ashley (2000), and it has led to less interest in teaching as lecturing staff become frustrated by rigid systems, which potentially inhibit attempts to engage students in learning. This is at a time when it could be argued that the opposite should be happening, with systems becoming more flexible to meet the needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds.

Henkel (2000:214) has also commented on the challenge presented to academics by greater diversity of the student population but, in parallel with those studies that noted non-traditional students' choice of new universities, sees there being a differential impact across the university sector. She stated that

The range of abilities, and even more the range of age, expectations and motivations had widened. Not surprisingly the difficulties these presented were felt to be greater, and in some cases markedly greater, in the less prestigious institutions. Their cohorts contained more students who in a previous generation would not have entered higher education.

Bauman (1997:19) previously noted this differentiation of university provision in the UK and applauded the fact that differences mean they are '...not comparable, not measurable by the same yardstick...' However, differential understandings and cultures can operate not only between universities, but also between and within the departments of a single university. For example Smith and Webster (1997:5) have pointed to a "mutual contestation of knowledge" within universities arising out of specialisation. Subject level differences combined with a more diverse population produce a variety of discourses and 'meaning-making' within the university and what Scott (1997:47) has termed 'local knowledges'. Thus responses to non-traditional students could show significant variation within a single university. In this vein, Henkel's (2000) discussion of difference between many students', largely instrumental, conceptions of the purpose of higher education and those of their teacher identified differences in lecturers' attitude relative to their disciplinary community. Economists in her study were the most positive about the perceived

instrumentalism of students but they were in a minority with many lecturers being dismayed by what was viewed as students making minimal effort to achieve limited goals. She also found a particular concern across science departments in new universities about the implications of changing student and management attitudes for minimum standards.

Bowl's (2003:140) study of non-traditional students in higher education cited above, although focussed on the students' perception did imply certain reactions to a diverse student population. She thus described some of the perceived negative responses to diversity and how lecturers could '... foster isolation and individualism and reinforce the hierarchical nature of education, through mystification of the teaching and assessment processes'. She also showed other ways in which lecturers had the power to convey to students their inadequacy, for example by labelling them as problematic and abnormal. However Bowl also recognised the relative powerlessness of lecturers to develop more emancipatory styles of teaching and the constraints on their time. Pressures to research and publish were seen as devaluing pedagogy within institutions and increased numbers without an increased resource also prevented close working relations between lecturers and individual students. The promotion of emancipatory and inclusionary practice is thus viewed as possibly being compromised by other requirements.

3. 5 Perceptions of and attitudes toward non-traditional students

A limited number of studies have focused explicitly upon lecturers' perception of non-traditional students, and the majority of those that exist are accounts of students' experiences of lecturers' perceptions (Baker et al., 2006). These accounts indicated that assumptions are made by academic staff about particular student groups. As

already indicated Bowl's (2003) study demonstrated the tendency for lecturers to 'problematise' non-traditional students, and, based on the reports of mature students, Wilson (1997) indicated that lecturers may perceive mature students as a threat. In a study which did undertake interviews with teaching staff Clegg et al. (2003) talked about a 'racialising discourse' when discussing the motivational problems of first-year students

However, Macdonald and Stratta (2001), after finding that students themselves believed they were viewed as a problem, undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with tutors in a higher education institution. They reported a consensus view, amongst the tutors interviewed, that 'non standard entry' students (defined as all those entering over 21 years of age) should not be categorised separately and that integration rather than difference should be the focus. A belief in equality of treatment for all students was offered as an explanation of this position. In addition tutors identified a lack of institutional provision to enable them to address the needs of particular groups. However, they did not identify any inclination to changing practice, as the authors stated,

Opening up access to HE was about allowing students entry and support in fitting into the undergraduate situation; it did not require any radical change on the part of tutors or the institution to deal with the new situation (Macdonald and Stratta, 2001:253).

It thus appears that research in this area indicates that whether tutors' are reluctant to identify any difference between students or they focus on students' assumed problems, it is likely that strategies emphasising adaptation and change in students are promoted whilst leaving institutional practices untouched. As the staff in a study regarding student diversity in Australian higher education maintained '...initiatives to address non-completion should focus on helping students to change, rather than

changing course design, teaching or institutional practices' (Taylor and Bedford, 2004: 390). These contentions will be explored further in the next section which looks at theorising diversity in higher education.

Chapter 4: Theorising Widening Access and Diversity in Higher Education

4.1 The widening access agenda - underlying assumptions

The basic assumptions of widening access have been touched upon in terms of policy development but require summarisation. Following this summary so-called access policy approaches (Jones and Thomas, 2005) will be outlined before considering a number of other relevant ideas from the wider literature concerned with inclusion.

Widening access policy is primarily rationalised through two distinct understandings. In summary, the first of these concerns the perceived injustice of the limited access available to certain groups of people and consequent difference in participation rates. It is thus an attempt to redress the balance, to allow equality of opportunity. This social justice argument, by emphasising admission procedures, has primarily rested upon an 'equal shares' approach to equal opportunity which Jewson and Mason (1986) in their workplace research saw as seeking the implementation of fair procedures. Skelton (2002) noted how New Labour thus linked access to their policy of social inclusion by emphasising rights and equality of opportunity.

The second argument promoting widening access concentrates on the economic needs of the country for a suitably skilled and educated workforce. A highly, and appropriately qualified workforce is seen as contributing to a globally competitive economy. Education is, in this respect, evaluated according to its enhancement of an individual's earning capacity and contribution to skills development. Educational expenditure is viewed as a financial investment for which there should be an economic return. This argument can be seen in the emphasis on employability and 'core skills'. Although giving prominence to the economic needs of the country this

argument is also presented as individually liberating and empowering - allowing people to move out of poverty to productively contribute to society.

Official rhetoric has presented...widened university participation as economically beneficial for the working-class groups, communities and individuals themselves, because it is assumed to result in increased personal earning potential and improved local and regional economic conditions. Personal satisfaction and fulfilment are also assumed to benefit individuals who have developed their capabilities and potential through HE participation. (Archer, 2003:121)

A particular aspect of the change assumed to accrue from widened participation is

...for working-class participants to change themselves and the national and/or local population by becoming more educated, skilled, affluent, socially mobile, 'civilized' and (implicitly) middle class (Archer and Leathwood, 2003:176).

The idea that widening participation will contribute to greater social coherence, stability, and inclusion, can be discerned in both social justice and economic arguments. In this respect, Watts and Bridges (2006:269) maintained that the desire for social justice is 'conveniently symmetrical' with the economic argument. Social exclusion is viewed as threatening, and barriers to participation are primarily seen as economically damaging (Baxter et al., 2007).

Whilst the agenda for widening access has been informed by these broad ideas, access policy has developed in different ways and Jones and Thomas (2005) identified three strands of access policy discourse, the academic approach, the utilitarian approach and the transformative approach.

4.2 Access policy approaches

The academic approach to access is exemplified in government policy which seeks to attract gifted young people into higher education by providing sufficient information and raising their aspirations. Low participation is seen to be a result of low aspiration

and as such the major focus is on aspiration raising initiatives, although it is recognised that lack of awareness may also play a part and therefore the provision of information is also seen as necessary. Both forms of activity take place largely outside of the institution and make little impact on the internal culture. As Jones and Thomas (2005:617) stated, 'A corollary of this is that institutional reform is all but disregarded. In particular, the curriculum is not viewed as problematic and remains unchanged'. Cultural divisions are largely ignored in this approach which Jones and Thomas saw as underpinned by a deficit model of potential entrants. As Archer and Yamashita (2003: 54) explained this approach ascribes deficit in terms of '...information, aspiration and motivation'.

The utilitarian approach to access policy also considers there to be a problem of low aspiration but in addition sees potential entrants as lacking in appropriate academic qualification. Jones and Thomas (2005) indicated that utilitarians see both the sector and potential entrants as needing to be receptive to the needs of the economy. Curriculum reform does take place in this approach as long as it is in the direction of increasing vocationally oriented programmes, learning skills and student support. Compensatory pre-entry activity and bursaries are used to encourage greater participation and overcome some structural barriers. However the approach does not represent fundamental change but rather it is '...bolted-on to core work, for example mentoring and guidance activities, learning support mechanisms...and standalone student services...' (Jones and Thomas, 2005: 618) .

Whilst Jones and Thomas saw the first two approaches as discernible in strategy and practice the final approach, named the transformative approach, is 'pieced together' from progressive ideas in adult education and as such is viewed as allowing a critical

insight into the former approaches. At the heart of the transformative approach is far-reaching structural change that is informed by underrepresented groups themselves. Diversity is viewed as a major strength and emphasis is placed on the prioritisation of knowledge that is relevant and valued by underrepresented groups. In a similar vein Walker (2003:170) has used Nussbaum's capabilities approach to suggest a different way of evaluating the success of our educational practices because

...this approach suggests a view of (higher) education as more than education for economic development, and incorporates an implicit view of education both as and for democratic citizenship, and understanding and solidarity under conditions of cultural difference and diversity.

Walker saw the capabilities approach as particularly relevant to widening participation and the development of enabling pedagogies as it implies a pedagogy which values difference and recognises the diverse cultural resources of students. This three stranded classification of access policy discourse provides an insight into different orientations to widening access.

The different approaches that Jones and Thomas (2005) identified represent ideal type classifications, and in reality a single institution may show aspects of all three. Other ideas regarding the inclusion of minority groups have also provided a means of considering orientations toward increased diversity in higher education. These ideas can be seen in the notions of assimilation, diversity management and empowerment.

4.3 Assimilation, diversity management and empowerment

Assimilationist assumptions were recognised in early responses to what was viewed as the 'race problem' in Britain (Williams, 1989). The term has been most frequently used to describe those ideas that were prominent during the period when mass immigration to Britain was encouraged to meet post-war labour shortages. The

central tenet of these ideas is that responsibility to adapt to the dominant culture is placed upon the minority group. In short, minority groups were required to assimilate and no additional help or intervention was deemed necessary. Just as the academic approach to access policy disregards the need for any institutional reform, assimilationist ideas regard only the minority group culture as requiring change.

It could be argued that non-traditional students are similarly being required to assimilate into an academic culture that is unfamiliar. In relation to compulsory education Slee (2001) described how many programmes which assessed outcomes referred to the inadequacy of participants in the programme if performance was ‘poor’ and he further maintained that inclusive education was nothing more than ‘...a default vocabulary for assimilation’ (Slee, 2001: 114). Sayed, (2002:8-9) has also argued that inclusivity can mask other agendas, stating that

... students are seen as excluded on the basis of their mis-match to ‘educational standards’, rather than the educational sector being seen as problematic for excluding them in the first instance. In other words students are seen as deficit or lacking while the situations from which they are being excluded are seen as upholding good quality standards and producing quality graduates.

He thus sees ‘exclusivity’ as providing ‘proof’ of high standards and asserted that a criticism of policies advocating inclusion has been that ‘new recruits’ bear the burden of such inclusion by being required to bring themselves ‘up to standard’.

Some similarity with these views can also be discerned in particular versions of the normalisation philosophy which has informed services for people with learning disabilities since the 1970s. Normalisation was initially presented as a radical critique of conventional ideas but has been shown to be deeply conservative (Chappell, 1992). The main aspect of normalisation that aligns with assimilationist ideas is its

assumption of consensus and shared values, and a lack of analysis of opposing interests. The onus is placed on changing individuals to make them more like the 'normal' population rather than on the acceptance of difference. Also the espoused aim of normalisation to provide '...socially valued life conditions and socially valued roles' (Wolfensberger and Thomas, 1983: 24) could be seen as analogous to the aim of widening participation to higher education. Thomas (2005:41) implied this when she argued that the focus, in widening participation discussions, on individuals acquiring social capital was more rooted in those conceptions of social capital that emphasised traditional power relationships than those that emphasised empowerment, and thus,

There is a danger that the process of widening participation in post-compulsory education is not about allowing people to develop the ... liberal, empowering conceptualisation of social capital, but is more about covertly 'normalising' people.

In relation to 'race' policy assimilation approaches gave way to a form of cultural pluralism in which the government proposed equality of opportunity within a framework of cultural diversity (Rattansi, 1992). This was to be promoted through the acceptance of cultural differences and the development of multicultural policies and practices. An emphasis on the importance of acknowledging diverse identities and the enrichment they can provide was also found in the 'diversity management' approach which informed workplace equality measures in the 1990s. Although there have been a wide range of interpretations of diversity management it primarily focuses on equality through difference rather than sameness. In relation to the workplace the business case for taking a diversity management approach has centred on the imperative to attract and retain a workforce that is drawn from an increasingly diverse pool of labour. Diversity initiatives have taken different forms and have included multicultural workshops, minority support groups and various corporate statements

declaring an appreciation of pluralism (Ellis and Sonnefield, 1994). The management of diversity and promotion of multi-culturalism within education was seen as a means of promoting cross-cultural understanding and, to some extent, as redressing the past mono-cultural approach of education. However, this orientation has been criticised for seeing culture as an essential aspect of identity, for emphasising difference and ignoring power dimensions and the complexity and contingent nature of cultural values (Gilroy, 2000). In addition, workplace approaches to diversity management have been seen as based upon a form of self-interest owing to a focus on improved performance and competitive advantage rather than social justice (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). It could similarly be argued that the drivers of widening access in higher education are often related to performance requirements and business requirements. The limited attention given to social justice and the political aspects of inclusion and exclusion in diversity management practices have been recognised by those advocating certain empowerment based approaches.

Two principal versions of empowerment can be discerned from the literature. The first of these is concerned with individuals developing capacities that enable them to work within existing systems. This is the sort of empowerment that is advocated by the widening access discourse that emphasises employability and the skills agenda. It rests on individual transformation and the acquisition of 'cultural capital'. It is questionable whether this really does constitute empowerment or whether it is simply a subtle form of social control. The second, and more radical, version (which Inglis [1997] preferred to term emancipation) advocates a need to transform the system. This is what Spedding and Gregson (2000:18) alluded to when they support the need to change the cultural bias in education in order that non-traditional students do not '...find their learning and themselves jeopardised or colonised by the social power

and dominant discourses of others'. Thomas (2001) similarly recognised the potential for cultural mismatch and saw the institutional culture as critical in determining whether an institution would be accepting of diversity. She thus argued that 'Too often potential students constitute the only group which is expected to change. Institutions and staff need to change also' (Thomas, 2001:103). However, such a focus on institutional transformation does not imply that individuals remain unchanged. Empowerment education, as Freire (1970) conceptualized it, involved the individual, the group and the system itself.

In addition to the concepts of assimilation, diversity management and empowerment certain aspects of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, which have already been mentioned in passing, were seen as important insofar as they capture 'the sense of higher education as a force that mediates, and at the same time reproduces, fundamental principles of social classification' (Naidoo, 2004:458).

4.4 Cultural capital and habitus

Although the limitations of this piece of work do not allow a detailed account of Bourdieu's theoretical framework some aspects are considered sufficiently relevant to an analysis of conceptions of non-traditional students to warrant discussion. Therefore a brief, and hopefully accessible, account of some key ideas is presented before turning to the methodology of the study.

The first concept that is relevant is that of 'cultural capital' which Bourdieu saw as existing within different fields. Bourdieu's notion of 'field' basically refers to those social spaces in which human activity occurs and in which individuals are positioned. Within these fields individuals are distinguished by amounts and combinations of

‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1989). This cultural capital can take three different forms, firstly it can be seen in an objectified form through those things designated as cultural, for example valued literature, music and art. Secondly it can be seen through credentialisation, the award of academic qualification which distinguishes individuals. Finally, it is embodied in manners of interaction and expression and seemingly intuitive responses. The meanings attached to such cultural signs and symbols give rise to a widely recognised cultural hierarchy. Cultural distinctions are accepted, although their basis is largely arbitrary. The importance of the notion of cultural capital to educational settings and the dominance of particular groups was recognised by Bourdieu. A key point regarding the relationship to educational settings can be seen in Olneck’s argument that

Reigning methods of organizing, instructing, and assessing students are represented as intrinsic to and solely instrumental for teaching and learning. Within this context, cultural capital is recognized (i.e., perceived and honored) as legitimate competence, whereas its arbitrary and class-based character is simultaneously misrecognized.
(Olneck, 2000:321)

Thus, those students who possess cultural capital are advantaged and those who do not are disadvantaged.

The second concept of significance to the study is that of ‘habitus’. The term habitus is used to denote those dispositions that arise from the interaction between objective structural location and personal history (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). It consists of a sort of unconscious competence and disposition which shapes perceptions and actions. The framework of habitus facilitates the meeting of certain goals, however, different frameworks acquire greater legitimacy than others and thus, habitus generates cultural capital. If the habitus finds the field unfamiliar there can be a transformative experience, however it is more likely that individuals will feel

‘discomfort, ambivalence and uncertainty’ (Reay et al, 2005:28). Whilst habitus allows an understanding of the complex way in which the past and present combine in individual activity and perception to provide ‘adaptation’ this rarely amounts to ‘radical conversion’ (Bourdieu, 1993:88)

Thus, for Bourdieu, comprehending the activity of any group or individual requires an understanding of the nature of how habitus generates cultural capital within a particular field and how it is adapted within that field. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that Bourdieu’s ideas have a continuing relevance to understanding higher education and a number of writers have seen his analytic constructs as useful to the study of aspects of widening participation. Particular aspects studied include student institutional choice (Reay, 1997), retention (Thomas, 2002; Longden, 2004) and the gendered experiences of working-class participants in higher education (Tett, 2000). It therefore seemed that an awareness of the concepts of cultural capital and habitus within Bourdieu’s theoretical framework would be helpful in examining the ways in which non-traditional students were perceived within the case study university.

This review of political and theoretical ideas surrounding widening access, together with the consideration of literature regarding the context and evidence of student diversity in higher education, informed the direction of the study. This will be discussed in the following chapters on the study’s methodology, methods and process.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Introduction

The choice of a particular research technique is ultimately rooted in how one views the world and one's beliefs about how that world can be known. Proposing to undertake a research study in a particular way is predicated upon taking a certain epistemological stance. This chapter attempts to clarify and convey the principles of the chosen methodology for studying higher education academics' and managers' conceptions of non-traditional students and understanding of widening participation. The principal assumptions of the stance taken are that the social world requires different methods of study to those used to study the natural world and that widening participation policies, in common with other social policies, are not simply received from on high and implemented but are actively interpreted within particular cultures and contexts. An appreciation of the active interpretation of policy within complex organisational, social and cultural contexts (Ball, 1994) and the discovery of new understandings regarding the conceptions that inform such implementation were thus important aspects of the study.

A number of key studies of diversity in higher education have concerned themselves with a quantitative appraisal of the effects of certain policies by, for example, determining the number of non-traditional students from various social groupings now accessing higher education (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997; Robertson and Hillman, 1997). Some such studies understate the problems of defining precisely what it is they are measuring, for example, Greenbank (2003:794) in relation to widening participation, highlighted

... how much of the current debate about widening participation in higher education is based on statistics relating to social class, which are often presented as unproblematic. In reality, classifying people by social class is fraught with problems and the statistics exclude a high proportion of students who remain unclassified.

Despite such shortcomings, a hierarchy of methods is often posited in which the assumed objectivity and credibility of quantitative approaches is ranked above all others. The inappropriateness of such a hierarchy has been raised in arguments against certain versions of evidence-based approaches to practice, particularly those versions that view the randomised control trial as a 'gold standard' regardless of the research context. In this vein Elliott (2001:564) argued

Both the indeterminate nature of educational value and principles and the context dependant nature of judgements about which concrete methods and procedures are consistent with them, suggest that educational research should take the form of case studies rather than randomised controlled trials.

It therefore seems that the research orthodoxy being assumed in notions of a 'gold standard' or a hierarchy of methods fails to acknowledge the lack of consensus over the nature and possibilities of inquiry. What constitutes 'best evidence' depends upon the issue being judged and the values of those judging.

It is therefore contended that an examination of academics' and managers' responses to greater diversity in the student population of higher education, as promoted by widening access policy, required that attention be paid to the complex social and cultural context of higher education. This required that different voices were heard and the influences on those voices were unravelled.

The following discussion explains why a qualitative, case based approach was suited to such a multifaceted investigation. It first presents the general research

orientation of the study and the benefits of focusing on a particular case. It then describes the methodological assumptions underlying the study, examines the implications of being an insider and considers reflexivity as a central concern. The practical application of such methodological principles is put forward in the following Chapter on the research method and process. This later Chapter describes the specific focus of the study and the methods of data collection and analysis that were employed.

5.2 Research orientation

In recent years a number of criticisms have been raised regarding the limited nature of research in education (Hargreaves, 1996; Tooley and Darby, 1998; Hillage et al., 1998). Such criticisms have contributed to an 'evidence-based' movement and calls for greater research respectability. At the same time it has been noted how performance measurement is dominating educational environments and therefore positivist approaches to research are more readily accepted and supported (MacPherson et al., 2000). However, Hammersley (2000) has accused those educational research critics with positivist orientations of ignoring the conception of social life that emphasises contingency, a diversity of perspectives and the active construction of the world. It is this latter conception of social life that underlies qualitative approaches and informed this study.

Although, as implied above, qualitative methods are regarded less highly than quantitative by some commentators, a contrasting perspective argues that understanding the social world is fundamentally different to understanding the natural world because social reality is actively created by individuals and because meanings, values, beliefs and aspirations are principal data for the social scientist. Qualitative

methods also allow a contextualised understanding of behaviour and a conceptualisation of the tacit knowledge ‘...that operates in settings that have high levels of multidimensionality, immediacy and unpredictability’ (Hammersley, 2000:395). According to this perspective qualitative studies are more suited to the study of social reality, although it is recognised that under the umbrella of ‘qualitative’ lies a vast array of approaches.

In terms of studying the social reality of educational settings MacPherson and his colleagues (2000) argued that case study approaches are capable of providing rich understandings of educational practice that can inform the implementation of public policy. They argued for an approach that moved beyond interpretation and analysis into action. If “knowledge of the particular” (Stake in Shwandt 1997:13) is required the case study approach appears well-suited.

This study attempted to discover how policies designed to increase the participation of non-traditional students were being acted out in the local setting of a post 92 university and sought to uncover the concerns and interests of a variety of groups within that setting. In doing so, it endeavoured to provide an understanding of the cultural conditions that influenced how non-traditional students were perceived within higher education and how diversity was managed.

Whilst many attempts to study such aspects of academic life have been undertaken they have frequently employed questionnaire and/or interview data. They have thus tended to emphasise the individualistic nature of policy responses rather than recognising the cultural contexts (Trowler, 1998). The orientation of this study as described above recognised the importance of cultural location and the need for a

more fine-grained study of responses to diversity in higher education. A case study strategy utilising ethnographic methods was thus viewed as most appropriate.

5.3 A case study strategy

To generalize is to be an idiot. To particularize is the lone distinction of merit. General knowledges are those that idiots possess (William Blake, 1808, in Stake, 2000:22).

The above statement does highlight that there are advantages to be gained from seeking a thorough understanding of the particular, although it may overstate the negatives of generalisation. The present study sought to understand how managers and academics were responding to the particular changes brought about by widening participation that, together with the many other changes, influence the higher education environment. Many writers have emphasised the suitability of a case study strategy for obtaining just such an understanding. As Stake asserted,

... a case study strategy is preferred when the inquirer seeks answers to how and why questions, when the inquirer has little control over events being studied, when the object of study is a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context, when boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear, and when it is desirable to use multiple sources of evidence (cited in Schwandt, 1997:13).

Actual definitions of case studies abound, and despite Verschuren (2003) having claimed there is little overall consensus in characterizations of the approach some common features can be discerned in the most frequently cited definitions – even if there is variance in actual practice. For example Yin (1989:23), who has written widely on the approach, highlighted similar aspects to Schwandt when he stated,

A case study is an empirical inquiry that: investigates the contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.

There thus seems to be a good argument for employing such an approach to gain an understanding of the particular in 'real-life' situations when the complex social and cultural context make it difficult to study the issue apart from that context. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001), for example, applauded the advantages of the case study as including, the possibility of in-depth understanding and ability to engage with complexity. They believed that case-studies retain more of the 'noise' of real-life and could facilitate conceptual and theoretical development.

However this positive appreciation of understanding the particular, reflected in Blake's previously cited quote, is sometimes overshadowed by arguments regarding the deficits of the approach for achieving generalisable results. This has significant implications if generalisation is what is sought, and Lincoln and Guba (2000:27) pointed to the many scientists who see generalisability as 'the be-all and end-all of inquiry'. Part of this concern with generalisability in educational studies derives from the demand for direct solutions. Despite considerable agreement that definitive answers are impossible in complex social contexts such as education, traditionally established assumptions have remained, as could be seen in David Blunkett's call for '... social scientists to help to determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective' (Blunkett, 2000, ESRC). In trying to provide such answers social scientists continue to seek generalisable conclusions.

A corollary to this is that studies of single cases, particularly when qualitatively based, are seen as less able to offer such direct answers and are therefore frequently considered less prestigious. Thus the most common criticism of the case study approach is just the reverse of its strength in providing a good understanding of the

particular, namely a concern that its results have limited external validity. Ragin (1989: ix) for example stated that

...case oriented researchers are always open to the charge that their findings are specific to the few cases they examine, and when they do make broad comparisons and attempt to generalise, they are often accused of letting their favourite case shape, or at least colour, their generalisations.

However, it can be argued that given the complexity of social situations such as educational environments even the employment of large samples and statistically sophisticated procedures does not mitigate against the need for judgement as to whether a research generalisation is applicable to a particular context (Donmoyer, 2000). This is especially pertinent where one may seek to utilise the general findings of research in settings other than that where the research was undertaken. Hargreaves (1999) thus moved from advocating an ‘evidence-based’ approach to, the more considered notion of, ‘evidence-informed’ practice. In this respect it seems

Research can only function as a heuristic; it can suggest possibilities but never dictate action. It may well be the case that case study research can fulfil this function as well, or possibly even better than more traditional approaches to research (Donmoyer, 2000:51).

5.4 Transferability and generalisability

If we accept that the understandings derived from a particular case-study could potentially provide insights into other situations we must still ask how we are to judge whether a particular understanding developed through a single case study is, in any sense, transferable to another context. One argument contests that the similarity between contexts will be important. Lincoln and Guba (1985) termed this ‘fittingness’, that is, the degree of congruence between two contexts. This implies that in order to judge whether it is reasonable to use the understanding developed in the case study in another context sufficient information about the

context of the case study is necessary. Lincoln and Guba, following Geertz (1973), have called the provision of such information ‘thick description’.

Goetz and LeCompte (1984) also argued that the applicability of the findings of a case study to another situation depends upon sufficient description of the study’s components to allow ‘comparability’, and sufficient description of the theoretical stance and research techniques employed to allow ‘translatability’. It follows that, if description such as that advocated by Lincoln and Guba, and Goetz and LeCompte is provided, it becomes the responsibility of the reader of research reports to determine the applicability of findings to their own particular context.

However, this is not the only way in which the findings of case study research can be seen as valuable. In addition to questioning the notion of generalisation in complex social situations and considering whether criteria for transferability from one case to another can be defined, there have also been attempts to consider alternative conceptions of generalisation. One such view holds that case study research can be useful in expanding the a priori conceptualisations that individuals hold. In this vein Yin (1994) argued that generalisation from a single case study design is made to theory and not to populations. He refuted the criticism that case study research is not widely applicable and, in doing so, argued that much of this criticism is founded on the spurious assumption that a single case resembles a single respondent. This assumption leads to the criticism of having a ‘small sample’. However Yin saw it as inappropriate to measure case study research in terms of statistical generalisation. He argued instead for analytic generalisation in which the empirical results of the study are compared to previously developed theory.

Mitchell (1983:207) has also noted that the validity of extrapolation in case study research

... depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but upon the cogency of the theoretical reasoning... and case studies may be used analytically... (only) if they are embedded in an appropriate theoretical framework.

Another version of how case study strategies can extend prior understanding has been offered by Stake (2000). Discussing evaluation research, he viewed a major advantage as being the resonance of case studies for potential users. In what he termed ‘naturalistic generalisation’ Stake argued that people will be able to extend their understanding due to information being presented in a form in which they usually experience it.

Donmoyer (2000), although recognising the potential of such a notion saw Stake’s discussion as having only limited use because, focussing on evaluation research, it did not address common concerns about generalisability to potentially different cases. He also took exception to Lincoln and Guba’s notion of transferability, which, although addressing the issue of complexity, assumed, as already noted, that findings are only applicable in other settings if those settings are similar to the original. This, according to Donmoyer, is not always necessary and he proposed an alternative conception of generalisation drawing on schema theory. Utilising Piagetian concepts of assimilation, accommodation, integration and differentiation to describe how experiential understanding is generalised, he argued that case-studies should be similarly viewed as expanding the range of interpretations available, rather than as an attempt to find the ‘correct’ interpretation. Thus the ‘vicarious experiences’ made available through case-studies are argued to have advantages for practitioners including allowing access to a wider range of experience – ‘they can take us to places

where most of us would not have an opportunity to go' (p 61) and allowing access to alternative perspectives – they let us 'see things we otherwise might not have seen' (p. 63).

From the foregoing account it would appear that a case study strategy does hold the potential to allow the understandings derived to be extended beyond the actual case itself. Whether this potential is realised will be related to a number of methodological issues and advocating a case-study strategy should not be confused with, nor substitute for, the explication of methodological principles.

5.5 Methodological assumptions

Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. We could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically, organically or culturally, and by mixed methods...(Stake, 2000: 435).

The case considered in the current study was a new university in Wales. Within this a particular focus was placed on the actions and conceptions of managers, lecturers and others closely involved with the widening access agenda. Clearly, within a case study of a single university, there may be case studies of several groups such as managers, academics, non-academic staff, and students and the range of information that can be accumulated can be extensive. Sources of evidence can include documents, archival records, interviews, and observations. The case study strategy itself thus does not presume a particular methodology it only sets the parameters for enquiry. Decisions regarding who to talk to and what to observe still needed to be made. Thus in the current study sampling choices occurred, with the main dimensions of such sampling being those of time, people and context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) have warned of the danger of being swamped by data, that the strategy can be time-consuming and that the complexity revealed is

sometimes difficult to represent. Given these potential difficulties it is important to clarify the underlying assumptions of the study at the outset.

In order to provide an understanding of real people in real situations and their common cultural understandings related to the perceived changing student population in higher education an ethnographic study was undertaken. Traditional ethnographic studies have concentrated on the systematic observation of social environments through fieldwork made up of a combination of observation, listening, open interviews and the writing of field notes. Whilst there are commonalities it is worth briefly noting some of the differences in ethnographic orientations.

Three of the major sociological epistemologies informing ethnographic work are phenomenology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. The model for ethnographic research based on a phenomenologically oriented paradigm accepts multiple realities and that the subjective reality of each individual is no less real than an objectively defined and measured reality because people act on their individual perceptions, and those actions have real consequences. Taken-for-granted assumptions need to be suspended by the researcher aiming to understand social life and such understanding can only be acquired when an act is viewed in context. Accordingly, phenomenologically oriented studies are generally inductive and make few explicit assumptions about sets of relationships. Ethnomethodology, a term first used by Garfinkel (1967), takes phenomenological arguments into practical research by making ordinary everyday practices 'anthropologically strange'. From this perspective action is contingent and all knowledge is viewed as relative to the subject. Therefore the only proper focus of study is how people give meaning to things through routine social practices. Finally, symbolic interactionism stresses the social

construction of identity through interaction with others and the importance of shared symbols (largely language) to meanings and expectations. The use of empathy and the participant observation method is favoured by symbolic interactionists.

Although the researcher had sympathy with the major tenets of symbolic interactionism it was considered that the major criticism levied against this paradigm, that it neglects social structure and relationships of power, was problematic in a study concerned with a 'non-traditional' group accessing what could be seen as an elite social institution (i.e. higher education). Rather than following the specific tenets of any of the traditional ethnographic approaches, the study was primarily informed by critical ethnography (see Carspecken, 1996).

Ball (1994) sees critical ethnography as allowing access to 'situated' discourses and the particular practices and power relations that operate in local settings. The basic epistemological assumptions underlying critical ethnography include a belief in a shared cultural reality as conveyed in Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus', i.e. '...an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted' (Bourdieu cited in Harker, 1992:16). It is also assumed that this socially constructed reality can provisionally be known by a researcher through participation with others in the setting, and through the research report, can be provisionally portrayed to others.

This approach is favoured because, whilst some of the more traditional ethnographic approaches may attempt to 'give voice' to participants, they can appear psychologistic and divorced from the wider social and historical context. Critical

approaches seek to explicitly locate particular practices within that wider frame of reference (Dicks and Mason, 1998).

A number of the more traditional ethnographic approaches try to avoid imposing a theoretical framework and argue for an approach that gives explanatory primacy to the beliefs and explanations of those studied. For example, Spradley (1979) warned against imposing the researcher's own theories on those being studied, and saw ethnography as providing an understanding of human behaviour through what the participants themselves know. Although this type of stance is sometimes portrayed as offering a 'value-free' representation it could also be viewed as legitimating the dominant ideologies of the situation. In this vein Wainwright (1997: unpaginated) contended that such studies suffer two related problems. Firstly:

...no attempt is made to place the beliefs and behaviour of the people being studied into an historical or structural context; it is considered sufficient to simply describe different forms of consciousness without trying to explain how and why they developed

and, secondly they have a

...tendency to adopt an uncritical attitude to the beliefs and consciousness of informants, without considering their epistemological adequacy or their emancipatory potential.

Such criticism does not imply that the subjective beliefs of those studied are not required but rather asserts that they should not be taken at face value and need to be subjected to historical and social analysis. A critical methodology, which Wainwright (1997) saw as relying upon the application of dialectical logic, attempts such an analysis. The basic implications of dialectical logic are, firstly a need to study the historical development of a phenomenon to reveal changes in the way it has been conceptualised over time, and secondly, a need to analyse a category's relationships with other phenomena in the social and economic totality (and the identification of

key relationships). Both are required in order to reveal the relationship between essence and appearance. Lather (1989) also describes the need for 'reciprocity' between researcher and researched, and between data and theory.

Whilst recognising that not all critical ethnographers would agree totally with his particular account Wainwright (1997: unpaginated) believed that a common assumption of the approach lay in '... synthesising the subjective testimony of informants with a broader historical and structural analysis.' On first sight there can appear a problem with such a synthesis insofar as it seems to accommodate two different conceptions of validity, one that rests on the non-imposition of a theoretical framework and one that takes a theoretical framework as essential. There are also practical problems of trying to give attention to both informant testimony and social critique, which, in order to resolve, requires employing abductive means of inquiry, i.e. through regarding concrete experience and explanation in a 'back and forth' fashion (Foley, 2002:472).

Both Foley and Wainwright saw reflexive practice as critical to managing this type of research, and Wainwright (1997:unpaginated) argued that ultimately all validity claims concern '...the techniques employed by the researcher to indulge a Socratic distaste for self-deception, and in critical ethnography this is achieved by reflexivity'.

But, before further consideration is given to the notion of reflexivity within the context of the critical ethnographic approach taken in the study the related methodological issue of the relationship between the researcher and the research site will be discussed.

5.6 An 'Insider' Ethnography

Since the time when members of the Chicago School advocated positions ranging from complete observer to complete participant a variety of roles have been proposed to explain the relationship of the researcher to the research site (Adler and Adler, 1987; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The Chicago School generally discouraged over-involvement ('going native') due to the potential influence of the researcher on the phenomena being studied. However this attempt to remain marginal within the research site has received some criticism. For example, ethnomethodologists, through the concept of indexicality, suggested that a valid sense of contextualised meanings could only be attained through participation in settings to the fullest extent. They criticised the Chicago School participant observers for emphasising detachment and objectivity as, they argued, that this approach assumed that the subject or knower could be separated from the object or known by methodologically scientific procedures. Such an approach was viewed as stemming from positivist thought which the Chicago School were seen as subtly incorporating into what they claimed to be a subjectivist methodology in order to gain acceptance by the social scientific community (Adler and Adler, 1987). Ethnomethodologists, in contrast, argued for the abandonment of theoretical frameworks in order to enter the subject's world. Going native was not a problem, it was the solution to a problem. However according to Adler and Adler the goal of ethnomethodology, in terms of the research role advocated, is extremely difficult to attain and even the most committed may find it impossible not to reflect theoretically on the research situation. They advocated the idea of the 'membership role' which acknowledges that just as any other group member engages in a variety of different roles so too can researchers. The complete membership role, one extreme of their continuum, may refer to researchers studying

settings of which they are already members and thus provides particular opportunities to understand the meaning of the situation. de Laine (2000:97) has also argued that,

A multiplicity of roles goes to make up the social self; the researcher may be mother, student, nurse or therapist. The individual performs multiple roles in the field, to be held in abeyance in some situations, or combined with others in differing circumstances.

Adler and Adler's contention was that the difference between their complete membership role and the complete participant of the Chicago School lay in the attitude to 'going native'. Unlike complete participants, the complete membership role implies that the member and researcher roles held by an individual can help each other and can be drawn on equally.

Alvesson (2003) also argued for what is termed 'self-ethnography', although the related term 'insider ethnography' may be preferable as it appears to communicate a clearer representation of the locus of the research, i.e. a site in which the researcher is already located, whereas Alvesson's term may be seen as referring to a 'confessional style' ethnography as described by Van Maanen, (1988). The advantages of already being an 'observing participant' in the situation, as Alvesson maintained, include that the insider is likely to be better positioned in terms of access and ability to provide a deeper understanding than is common. Those studies in which the researcher comes from 'outside' may suffer

... the problem of 'not getting close enough', of adopting an approach which is too superficial and which merely provides a veneer of plausibility for an analysis to which the researcher is obviously committed (Fielding, 1993:158).

Compared to more conventional ethnographies it is also an economic means of undertaking a research study. The greater opportunity for extended study and greater ability to identify a number of focussed situations that illuminate a particular theme

comes with the 'insider' role. Alvesson saw this approach as being particularly appropriate for university settings and highlighted some such studies, including Fairclough's (1993) use of his own application for promotion to consider marketization; Watson's (1996) study of interaction with students, and his own study of 'multiple cultural configurations' (Alvesson, 1993). Although advocating the advantages of this approach, Alvesson also warned of the dangers of narcissism, the unethical portrayal of others, through, for example, covert observations, and the omission of 'taboo' aspects of the culture. Alvesson also noted how undertaking this form of research may be easier in some situations and at certain points in a career. Within the university setting some of the characteristics of a role that would favour the approach include, having affiliations with more than one discipline, being a 'newcomer' and having access to a range of organisational sites. It is also clear that a strong concern to conform to organisational norms and lack of willingness to be self-reflective would militate against taking such an approach.

Although having a special significance for 'insider' studies reflexivity has been recognised as an important aspect of qualitative research generally owing to the researcher being '... historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied' (Denzin 2001:3). Denzin further claimed that interpretive research '... begins and ends with the biography and the self of the researcher' (p.32). This is an important issue as it highlights the preconceptions that the researcher brings to the focus of their study and thus the necessity of stating beforehand their own interpretation of the phenomena. In a critical ethnographic study such as this, where the researcher is an insider, reflexivity has been of crucial importance.

5.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to observe herself or himself so as to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of her or his own perspective and voice as well as – and often in contrast to – the perspectives and voices of those she or he observes and talks to during fieldwork (Patton, 2002:299).

Discussing the idea of being reflexive Troyna (in Halpin and Troyna, 1994:5) saw it as ‘...a diffuse concept which is used by academics in a bewildering number of ways’, sometimes in relation to the epistemological stance taken and sometimes in relation to the particular method.

Despite some undoubtedly confusing uses of the terminology (see Hammersley, 1983; Burr, 1995) reflexive approaches have provided a challenge to more technical accounts of the research process, which appear to divorce this process from the social and political relationships involved. Reflexivity is most commonly understood as a process of self-awareness during the process of research that aids in making the construction of knowledge more transparent and therefore allows us to produce more accurate analyses. Steier (1991) saw reflexivity as being an interest in the way we construct ourselves socially whilst also constructing the objects of our research and it has become associated with the establishment of validity in qualitative research (Ball, 1995).

Pillow (2003:179) saw reflexivity as requiring the researcher

...to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher’s self location (across for example, gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position, and interests influence all stages of the research process.

Similarly, for Callaway, (1992:33) it became a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness. Krieger (1991:89) saw it as offering a tool to ‘...evaluate how intersubjective elements influence data collection and analysis’, and where ‘...researchers engage in explicit, self-aware analysis of their own role...’. Whilst, for Hertz (1997: viii), to be reflexive, ‘...is to have an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment’. Importantly, in terms of the preceding discussion of insider ethnography, Finlay (2002:531) maintained that through the use of reflexivity ‘... subjectivity in research can be transformed from a problem to an opportunity’. The ‘problem’ of subjectivity arises from what Alveson and Skoldberg (2000) have emphasised concerning how certain interpretations of data are limited by the researcher’s ‘repertoire of interpretations’ and although that repertoire itself can potentially be affected by ambivalent or unexpected material such material is more often ignored or dismissed.

Thus, many writers have applauded the virtues of taking a reflexive approach in qualitative research. However as Pillow (2003:176) argued whilst many qualitative researchers state they use reflexivity few define how they are using it ‘... as if it is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical qualitative research’. Balancing the need to be reflexively aware during the research process whilst presenting and analysing the experiences of others is no mean feat. There is considerable agreement that reflexive analysis is difficult and a particular danger lies in the possibility of it becoming an indulgence in excessive self-analysis (Greenbank, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Alveson and Skoldberg, 2000; Fine et al., 2000). As Patai (1994:70) stated ‘...we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly’.

The way in which reflexivity was built into the study is discussed in the following section. This section also provides an account of the focus and methods of data collection and analysis and aims to demonstrate how the methodological principles described were put into practice.

Chapter 6: The Research Method and Process

6.1 Introduction

As stated, the principal aim of the study was to discover the ways in which non-traditional students, and the promotion of their participation in higher education through widening access policy, was understood and represented by lecturers and managers within a higher education setting. It was believed that such understanding could help identify actions needed to support a positive student experience and lead to specific recommendations for action. The achievement of such understanding clearly depended upon a suitable research design. Marshall and Rossman (2006:13) argued that sound research design should be ‘...based on knowledge gained from the methodological literature and previous work’ and should ‘...flow logically from the research questions and from their conceptual framework’. Discovering how the participation of non-traditional students was perceived required an identification of the tacit understandings of those working in higher education. This aim strongly suggested a qualitative approach, as indicated in the previous Chapter. The literature on widening participation and non-traditional students also suggested particular areas as needing further investigation; the remainder of this Chapter states these areas of focus and describes the way in which the study was undertaken.

An account of the overall design of the research study is initially provided in order to show the different stages of the process. Next, a description is given of the preparation undertaken to define the parameters of the study and reflect upon the researcher’s relationships within the setting. The sampling procedure and the selection of documents, meetings, and individuals is then reported. Data gathering

processes are detailed, and certain dilemmas expressed. Finally, the means of analysis is described.

6.2 Outline of the research design and process

To help order my ideas regarding sources of information, strategies of information gathering and to guide the stages of research, I initially constructed a simplified table of the steps involved in applying my proposed methodology. This primarily, although not wholly, drew on Carspecken's (1996) work on critical ethnography. A refinement of this initial table is presented in Table 6.1 overleaf to provide an outline of the stages that were undertaken to complete the study.

It should be noted that although the steps presented in Table 6.1 may appear to indicate a linear process this presentation is an aid to summary and simplification and does not purport to provide accuracy of chronological representation. The stages were revisited and, for example, reflexivity was not confined to the preparatory stage. Table 6.1 does however provide an outline of the different elements involved in the research process and presents the reason for each stage of that process. Also, when initially constructed, it helped provide a reference point and guide for my activity.

TABLE 6.1 The Research Process (adapted from Carspecken, 1996)

| STEP | NATURE of STEP | WHY? | EXAMPLES |
|--|--|---|---|
| Preparatory Create a list of research questions | Broad, general, flexible Can be changed during the study as understanding develops | To delineate the field whilst avoiding closing off opportunities or introducing bias | How are 'non-traditional' students perceived? What assumptions are made about non-traditional students? What practices (if any) are seen as needing to change in response to greater diversity? |
| Preparatory List investigation sources that potentially provide answers to research questions | Specific social routines of the institution and associated cultural forms | To delineate the sources and social sites which will be studied and whether they will be studied 'intensively' or 'journalistically'. | Policy and strategy documents. Board/committee meetings Informal groups from different departments and 'key informants' (e.g. managers, lecturers, support unit staff) |
| Preparatory Explore personal value orientation | Reflections upon origins of own perspective | To raise awareness of potential personal bias. To make perspective transparent | Peer interview about 'expectations'. Accounts of personal perspective – contained in field notes. |
| 1 - Compile the primary record | Observations of interactions in defined sites, including relevant artefacts. Some 'thick description', some 'journalistic' | To compare relatively 'passive' observations with material collected later in the research process when facilitating discussion. | Description of particular meetings, parts of meetings e.g. Widening Access Forum., papers on retention at Learning & Teaching Board. Documents such as the Learning & Teaching Strategy, Corporate Plan etc. Other naturally occurring events |
| 2.-Begin analytic work through 'preliminary reconstructive analysis' | Explicit noting of possible meanings, both routine & unusual events. Selection of representative segments and anomalies for consideration. | To clarify impressions from initial observations. To identify issues to be explored in continuing observation/interviews | Each single meeting and document repeatedly read to explicitly identify 'truth claims'. |
| 3.-Dialogical data generation | Dialogues between researcher & researched. Facilitate 'talk' through semi-structured qualitative interviews and group discussion. | To explore impressions gained from preliminary reconstructive analysis. To identify the subjective truth claims of informants. | Interviews in departments. 'Lead-off' questions and a number of themes identified. Discussion encouraged by active listening, para-phrasing, etc. |
| 4.-Describe system relations | Examination of relationship between different related sites or sources. Focus on particular sites & cultural groupings. | To uncover how the activities of one site influence another to establish patterns and disjunctures and shared understandings | Interpretations worked out in Stages 1-3 compared with one another |
| 5.-Use system relations for explanation | Consideration of findings in the light of existing social theories | To interrogate findings | Findings considered in terms of relevant theories. |

Table 6.1 shows that the preparatory stages of the study involved delineation of the topic and the selection of sites and sources for investigation. In addition, prior to fieldwork, expectations were discussed with a 'critical friend'. This was undertaken in order to 'surface' my own assumptions and to openly convey any presuppositions held regarding the topic, including both the academic theories and personal experience that made up my 'repertoire of interpretations'. These were also consciously reflected upon when writing field notes and are made explicit in this presentation of the study.

In the first stage of fieldwork I read the selected documents and attended selected meetings, making notes on both. I also made field notes on unforeseen events and conversations. Interrogation of these provided an ongoing preliminary analysis which was used to inform subsequent selections. Based on the preliminary findings interviews were arranged with staff from two departments. Another stage of analysis looked for relationships between different findings and their significance in terms of the theories discussed in Chapter 4. Each of these stages is discussed below.

6.3 Preliminary preparation: delineating the study

... we must recognise that, much less than other forms of social research, the course of ethnography cannot be pre-determined. But this neither eliminates the need for pre-fieldwork preparation nor means that the researcher's behaviour in the field need be haphazard, merely adjusting to events by taking 'the line of least resistance'. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:24)

As suggested in the above quotation, preparation is necessary prior to engaging in the field and a systematic approach to gathering information is required. One preliminary, and vital, aspect of preparation is delineation of the topic of study. Initially this is

just an outline of what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:24), drawing on Malinowski, refer to as 'foreshadowed problems'. These provide the stimulus for the research and, as previously commented upon, in this study derived from a number of personal experiences concerning the perception of non-traditional students and an interest in exploring staff perceptions of greater diversity in post-compulsory education. The research interest thus centred on perceptions of non-traditional students, and the implications of widening participation policy.

In addition to exploring these perceptions and the understandings of widening participation policy within the setting the literature also suggested a number of associated research questions. These were:

- Who are defined as non-traditional students in the institution, i.e. what groups are assumed to be involved the widening participation agenda?
- How are the needs of non-traditional students understood by lecturers and managers?
- What actions are taken or proposed in response to greater diversity of the student population?
- Are there any challenges or constraints involved in managing a diverse student population?
- Are non-traditional students perceived to be integrated into the setting?

It was considered that answering these questions would allow a greater understanding of how widening access policy was being 'played out' within a new university. In particular, these questions were framed to allow a subsequent analysis of whether the perceptions and practices of staff indicated opportunities for transformative and empowering approaches to managing student diversity in higher education.

6.4 Relationship to the research site: recognising the advantages and disadvantages of insider status

The research took place in a post-92 higher education institution in which I had worked (in different roles) for twelve years prior to the beginning of the study. There were both opportunities and constraints involved in choosing to undertake research in such a familiar place. A number of complex relationships were involved, such as being simultaneously part of the ongoing activity and remaining sufficiently detached; being familiar with experiences and at the same time making them 'strange'; above all being aware of my own role and influence (Tricoglus, 2001; Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003).

Although the 'closeness' of the researcher in this approach required that the issue of subjectivity was fully addressed, owing to its potential to act both positively and negatively as '...a complex mix of resource and blinder' (Alvesson, 2003:184), undertaking the study led to a more sophisticated understanding of the researcher/research relationship. In essence, a greater appreciation of the dimensions of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' developed and, as others have noted, it was recognised that the researcher can be differently positioned and move between these boundaries, at different times, in different places, and according to different features of personal identity (Griffith, 1998; Mercer, 2007). Whilst, on many occasions during the study, my relationships tended towards the insider end of the insider/outsider continuum there were also those occasions when my position shifted.

The significant period of time spent within the university prior to the study led me to see myself as an 'insider', although this categorisation itself is not as straightforward

as it seems. Griffiths (1998:361) definition of an outsider as ‘...a researcher who does not have any intimate knowledge of the group being researched...’ was clearly not applicable. However his definition of an insider as ‘...someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched’ was also problematic as in many ways it was the lack of shared history with many of my colleagues that had sparked my interest in the topic. It is likely that the insider/outsider dichotomy does not exist in reality owing to the situational and contingent nature of certain features of identity (DeVault, 1996). Nevertheless there was a significant ‘insider’ aspect to my status in the university and this provided some advantages, for example in knowing where to focus attention, what to read and who to speak to, and being able to access data in a time efficient way.

As implied my insider status also differed according to the particular situation within the institution. I was a member of some groups prior to the study whereas my attendance at others had to be negotiated. By virtue of these particular membership statuses (Adler and Adler, 1987) I knew that in some situations I would be a ‘complete member’ (for example when participating in the university Learning and Teaching Board) whereas in others my role was more akin to that of observer (for example when accessing the Widening Access and Participation forum). The implication of these different statuses was given consideration and achieving openness, whilst also gaining the benefit of being reasonably unobtrusive, was carefully managed. Formal permission to undertake the research was obtained through the submission of a proposal and research outline, however, during fieldwork obtaining consent was, of necessity, a continuous process which was gained in various ways through interaction and dialogue. In addition to specific individual

consent (for example, for interviews) I broadcast my research purpose as broadly as possible.

As stated, my opportunity for access within the institution was relatively privileged. At the beginning of the study my role within the university had, for the previous 4 years, been that of Senior Lecturer and the Head of a Centre delivering programmes across a number of different disciplines. The Centre included academics from social work, housing and health care backgrounds. In addition to 'knowing' the department in which I was formally located I also had a number of links with other departments through, for example, being a member of a research group in one department, teaching postgraduate students from another and authoring policy documents in collaboration with a number of central unit staff. During my time at the university I had also developed relationships with a wide range of individuals. I believe this background benefited me in terms of access and that, in view of my academic history, I was not perceived as strongly aligned with one department or disciplinary area.

A number of events in my personal career during the course of the study led to changes in my original vantage point. Firstly, whilst still in the process of engaging with the literature regarding non-traditional students, and before I commenced data collection, I was seconded for 40% of my time to manage a central unit concerned with the quality enhancement of learning and teaching. This unit had the remit to undertake university-wide surveys regarding student satisfaction and to analyse these and other sources of data in order to inform improvement oriented action planning. Later I was promoted to a level three post (Dean) with a cross-university responsibility for learning and teaching. These role changes, in addition to opening up

the opportunity for even greater access to potential sources of information, provided me with three different vantage points from which to view the research topic. However I did wonder whether my changing status may have presented a disadvantage in terms of how I was viewed, as I could be seen as being increasingly part of 'the establishment' and, therefore, some individuals could be more guarded in their disclosures. Although some 'image management' was evident in conversations and interviews I believe that, in actuality, my position had a very limited influence on the discussions that took place, perhaps due to my promotion being relatively recent and my being more familiar to colleagues in other roles. For example, several interviewees commented freely on 'management' pressures to increase student numbers and referred to 'the centre', a colloquial term for central management. These comments were made as if to a peer rather than to someone who was part of the management group referred to. I also believe that the way interviews and conversations were conducted, as described later in this Chapter, helped to equalise differences and allow a more naturalistic, open exchange.

Having an established role within the research setting was advantageous in terms of having a rapport with others, allowing freer access and, being a relatively economic means of gathering data. However there was also the need to balance different role commitments. Although my relationship to the setting meant there was little restriction in terms of access to a broad range of data sources, and could be seen as less time-consuming than it could have been, the need to simultaneously engage in the tasks necessary to maintain my work role as well as my research role presented its own issues. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:106-7) stated in relation to the strategy of 'complete participation'

It will prove hard for the field worker to arrange his or her actions in order to optimise data collection possibilities. Some potentially fruitful lines of inquiry may be rendered practically impossible, insofar as the complete participant has to act in accordance with existing role expectations.

This privileged position regarding access necessitated careful preliminary decision making regarding the selection of settings and documents to investigate.

6.5 Selection of sites for investigation: the overview

Prior to engaging in the field potential investigation sources were listed and an initial selection made. Selectivity was important, not only for the pragmatic reasons of time availability and having to be away from the setting (or a particular site) to meet other commitments (and the impossibility of being in two places at once), but also to ensure that, within the limited time available, best use was made of the wide range of documents and observations available. A purposive sampling of documents and sites was undertaken with the initial selection based on prior knowledge of those fora in which there was likely to be discussion about widening participation and student diversity. Meetings chosen were also known to include a number of different groupings and individuals from within the university. One advantage of such purposive sampling, in addition to being economic, is recognised as being its usefulness in allowing a focus upon events that can illuminate the research questions (Dane, 1990). As noted, there was value in being an insider in this respect. Nevertheless these initial decisions were recognised as a platform for further investigation and thus were made in the spirit of being simply 'a starting point' from which further sources could emerge.

Inevitably some decisions were changed in practice. One such decision concerned the starting date and length of time of the study. Originally this decision was influenced by, whilst wanting to be sufficiently rigorous, also desiring a fairly early completion. A decision was taken based on the recognition of some critical points in the academic year when the nature of the student group became a 'hot topic'. These points in time revolved around the admission of students (August/September) and the outcome of exams (June/July). In order to balance these times with other periods in the academic year and to have a sufficient length of time in the field initially the decision was made to actively engage in data gathering from April 2005 to December 2005. In actuality data was gathered and reflected upon from May 2005 to January 2007. The lengthening of the originally proposed period was due to the practical organisation of being able to attend particular meetings and to arrange interviews. Also, the previously mentioned need to maintain other commitments influenced the decision to lengthen the time, but the principle of covering relevant times of the year was not compromised. The need to change demonstrated that despite being 'in situ' data collection in ethnography can be a lengthy business.

6.6 The selection of documents

Internal policy documents were considered to be one important source of information. Atkinson and Coffey (1997) warned that representing academic settings as if they were devoid of written documents fails to do justice to those settings. However identification of which documents to include in the study was not a simple task. Clearly one way in which to select documents would have been to utilize standardized forms of sampling, but apart from the difficulty of determining what constituted the totality of relevant documents it was thought likely that this would result in a high number of documents with limited relevance to the research focus.

Therefore a purposeful selection according to perceived significance was undertaken. This again was an instance where the insider role was of benefit because the judgement required to make a selection was made more dependable through the researcher's prior knowledge. In the institution being studied three particular documents concerned with student diversity were identified as having significance for strategic and public presentational purposes. These documents were the Corporate Plan, the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Widening Access and Participation Strategy.

Documents are clearly shaped by their purpose and will always be a reflection of those things that cannot be said and those things that must be said. This is particularly true of strategies required to be read by funding bodies and thus, in accord with Atkinson and Coffey (1997:47) the concern was '... to approach them for what they are and what they are used to accomplish'. The orientation to the documents was therefore context analytic and recognised '... documents as elements in the larger field of social activity, with meanings that are socially situated' (Miller and Alvarado, 2005:351).

6.7 The selection of meetings

During the preliminary phase of the study, in addition to examining documentary sources, a number of observations were made. These observations were not confined to specific meetings and, within the timeframe of the study, valuable data was also gathered from naturally occurring conversations. However, specific meetings were identified at the beginning of the study as potential sources of information. One of the formal meetings identified was the Learning and Teaching Board which met at least five times per year. The Learning and Teaching Board was classified as an academic

committee and received and discussed papers of strategic and operational relevance to learning and teaching across the university. It also discussed policy related to widening participation and received progress reports on both widening access and retention initiatives and was thus seen as relevant to the research. I was a member of the Board, and, for the purpose of the study, the Board meetings that took place in the period June 2005 to June 2006 were observed.

The second formal meeting selected was that of the Equality and Diversity committee which met at least three times per year. This was classified as a management committee and held the remit to consider all aspects of equal opportunities throughout the working and education environment of the university. This included monitoring policies and procedures, promoting good practice and considering legislative requirements related to equality. I was also a member of this committee and, for the purpose of this study those committees which took place within the same time frame as already stated were observed.

In both the Learning and Teaching Board and the Equality and Diversity Committee, as I was a full member, the negotiation of access for research purposes involved informing members of the research topic and gaining their approval. It was believed to be important to sample such formal meetings, not only because of the content of the areas discussed, but also because the behaviour of those within the meeting could provide a potentially useful comparison with the attitudes and behaviour observed in less formal situations.

The final meeting selected was that of the Widening Access and Participation Forum. This group was not part of the formal constitution of the university and was therefore

less formal in its proceedings. It had been formed by the widening access team in order to communicate and plan their activities. I was not a member of the group and therefore negotiated attendance at those meetings held between June 2005 and June 2006 for the purpose of the research. Due to other commitments I was unable to attend the final of the three meetings held within this timeframe but did receive relevant papers and minutes.

As already stated observations were not confined to these three cycles of meetings and also included naturally occurring conversations. In addition, in this first phase of the study, some individuals and groups were approached to follow up emerging themes, and in one case, a request was made to attend a specific meeting. The events that were arranged during the course of the study involved those staff with a particular responsibility for aspects of widening participation, retention or student equality and diversity. Table 6.2 overleaf lists these arranged discussions and the meetings observed. The notes made of meetings and such arranged conversations, together with more naturalistic occurrences and the documentary sources described, provided the primary record from which analytic work began. This analysis allowed a clarification of the impressions gained from initial observations and an identification of the issues to be explored in continuing observations and interviews. In particular, this first phase of the research revealed a perception held by a number of central staff with responsibility for widening participation that some departments were more accepting of the aims of widening participation than others. For this reason the interviews that were conducted in the next phase of the study were arranged in two departments that were perceived as representing either end of this continuum of acceptance.

Table 6.2 Selected Meetings and Arranged Discussions for Primary Record

| Month/Year | Meeting | Time Period |
|---------------|---|--------------|
| June 2005 | WAP Forum | 1hr 40 mins |
| June 2005 | L&T Board | 2hr. 40mins |
| July 2005 | Equality & Diversity Committee | 2hrs 10 mins |
| Sept 2005 | <i>Discussion with member of WAP Forum</i> | 30mins |
| Oct. 2005 | L&T Board | 2hrs 20mins |
| Oct 2005 | Equality & Diversity Committee | 1hr 40mins |
| Nov 2005 | L&T Board | 2hrs 15mins |
| December 2005 | WAP Forum | 1hr 30 mins |
| December 2005 | <i>Discussion with manager of Widening Access</i> | 20 mins |
| Jan 2006 | <i>Discussion with staff development manager</i> | 20mins |
| Jan 2006 | <i>Discussion with 3 quality enhancement staff (T)*</i> | 30mins |
| Feb 2006 | L&T Board | 2hrs 30mins |
| Feb 2006 | Equality & Diversity Committee | 1hr 40 mins |
| April 2006 | L&T Board | 2hr 20mins |
| June 2006 | L&T Board | 2hrs 30mins |
| August 2006 | <i>WAP Strategy Meeting with Funding Body</i> | 50mins |
| Sept 2006 | <i>Discussion with Equality Officer</i> | 30mins |
| Oct 2006 | <i>Discussion with Disability Services Manager (T)*</i> | 30mins |

*(T) denotes the discussion was taped and transcribed

6.8 The selection of persons for interview

The sampling of persons was inevitably a complex undertaking in such a multifaceted organisation. In the first stage of the research the meetings identified, and the discussions around these meetings, had provided access to individuals from across the departments of the university. The insights derived from such preliminary investigation enabled decisions to be made regarding further sources. The different conceptions of the orientation of particular departments, identified in the preliminary stages of analysis, led to the identification of two specific departments and a series of interviews were conducted with staff within these. One department was focussed around the disciplinary areas of health, social science and related vocational subjects and one department specialised in sport and physical recreation.

The former department was commonly perceived to have the greater number of non-traditional students and also as embodying principles welcoming non-traditional students. Preliminary analysis indicated that several factors influenced this perception including the number of professional programmes in the department that tended to attract mature students, the perception of the values of particular subject areas (such as social work) and the number of students entering programmes from franchises in further education colleges. In contrast to this the latter department was generally perceived as having the greatest number of traditional students and being not as welcoming of non-traditional students. This image came largely from the department's ability to set relatively high entrance requirements due to the popularity of programmes. This department had the highest contention rate across all departments in the university and the lowest drop-out rate ('drop-out' often being associated with having a high number of non-traditional entrants).

Six lecturers and one manager in each department were interviewed. In order to select lecturers with different lengths of experience Heads of Department were asked to provide the names of well-established members of staff (i.e. with over 10 years experience in the university), relatively new members of staff (i.e. with less than 2 years experience in the university) and members of staff whose length of experience fell between these extremes. In order to minimise any potential issues of power in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and to maximise opportunities for naturalistic discussion I decided to interview lecturers in pairs. This strategy also had efficiency benefits. All staff from the groupings were contacted and provided with an outline of the research interest. All gave their consent to interviews being taped and these tapes were later transcribed for analysis. Mutual availability of lecturers meeting the stated requirements dictated the individuals who were interviewed. Thus each pair of lecturers interviewed in each department represented one of the categories of well-established, new or 'medium term' as stipulated above. In addition, in each department one senior manager was interviewed. The initial intention was to interview the Head of each Department but it was doubted that this would provide any further insight than had already been gained from attendance at Boards and Committees and the discussions of the preliminary phase. However, one member of each department's management team, with less direct responsibility for the student 'mix' and thus with possibly less personal investment in the 'corporate' statements which had already been accessed, was interviewed.

The general purpose of the interviews was to gain further understanding of how policies aimed at increasing the diversity of the student population were conceived, to follow up the themes that were emerging and, in particular, to explore the impact on practice. A questioning frame covering the key research questions for the study was

used to guide interviews. In addition ideas and findings which had emerged from meetings, documentation or conversations were presented to interviewees to stimulate discussion and encourage comment. This served as a means of evaluating field notes and, if agreement was found, gave credibility to the contention that this was a shared understanding within the institution. Previously acquired skills, such as using different question forms, probing, active listening and summarising were used within interviews. It was also recognised that there is, inevitably, in every interview, a concern (even if not consciously acknowledged) with both image management and the accomplishment of a particular social interaction. It is not simply an interviewee providing information for use by the interviewer. However, I believe that in all cases a relaxed and positive interview atmosphere was achieved.

In total twelve lecturers and two department managers were interviewed. In each department both managers were male and four of the lecturers were female and two were male. The order of these interviews is provided in Table 6.3 overleaf and the identification of individuals in this Table is used in the interview extracts provided in the discussion of findings. Where a verbatim quotation used in the discussion of findings is not identified it is taken from outside these interviews.

Table 6.3 Interviews in Departments

| Interview number | Interviewee(s) | Identification |
|------------------|---|----------------|
| 1 | Female lecturer, sport department over 10 years | SFe1 |
| | Female lecturer, sport department over 10 years | SFe2 |
| 2 | Female lecturer, health care department approx. 7years | HFm1 |
| | Female lecturer, health care department approx 5 years | HFm2 |
| 3 | Male lecturer, sport department approx 7 years | SMm1 |
| | Male lecturer, sport department approx 4 years) | SMm2 |
| 4 | Female lecturer, sport department less than 2 years | SFs1 |
| | Female lecturer, sport department less than 2 years | SFs2 |
| 5 | Female lecturer, health care department less than 2 years | HFf1 |
| | Female lecturer, health care department less than 2 years | HFf2 |
| 6 | Male lecturer, health care department over 10 years) | HMe1 |
| | Male lecturer, health care department over 10 years | HMe2 |
| 7 | Male manager, health care department over 10 years | MH |
| 8 | Male manager, sport department over 10 years | MS |

6.9 Dilemmas in the Field

Inevitably, a study of this kind involves the researcher in certain decisions and dilemmas during the course of the study. Some such decisions regarding design and sampling have already been outlined in the previous discussion and this section briefly details some others that came about during the study.

One concerned the amount of information provided to colleagues. Whether they should be 'fully informed' or whether such full information could 'contaminate' the study (Silverman, 2000). Although colleagues were told of the broad research purpose of the study, i.e. to discover how non-traditional students are seen and whether diversity in the student population influences practice, any fuller account of the research was avoided in order to minimise discussion of the study itself. This broad outline appeared to satisfy colleagues' interest and they showed no unwillingness to discuss the topic further, knowing of the research interest.

Another issue concerned the availability of information. Being in the institution all day inevitably led to conversations being overheard which had relevance to the research topic. Given the potential for misunderstanding and the lack of negotiation with those making comment it was decided not to use any data that came from something overheard by chance. This is not to say that no naturally occurring conversations were used. If personally involved in conversation, and thus having the opportunity to explore understanding and the opportunity to inform or remind others of my research interest, such conversations were seen as appropriate for data collection purposes. For example, during one meeting a manager began an impassioned speech on widening access. It was quite inappropriate to interrupt and remind everyone of my research but I spoke to the individual concerned after the

meeting, reminding him of my research and the relevance of his comments and thus gave him the opportunity to voice any concern. He then elaborated on his previous comments with the clear understanding that I was researching this area.

In all cases, the identity of those involved in meetings, discussions and conversations have been safeguarded in the presentation of findings. This assurance of anonymity was given in order to minimise any concerns that individuals may have held.

6.10 Analysis

In ethnography... you learn something ("collect some data"), then you try to make sense out of it ("analysis"), then you go back to see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experience ("collect more data"), then you refine your interpretation ("more analysis") and so on. The process is dialectic, not linear. (Agar, 1980:9)

The general process described by Agar was followed insofar as analytic notes were made on documents and field notes throughout the study to allow progressive focusing and help direct further inquiry. In this sense, analysis was something that took place throughout the study and was not a separate self-contained phase. This involved using the key research questions (see page 69) as a framework together with a provisional, broad set of categories concerning these questions, drawn from the literature, to analyse the selected documents and observations. However, when the total primary record was assembled and final interviews completed, an analysis that explicitly drew on the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 4 was undertaken.

To reiterate, the study was principally concerned to explore the ways in which non-traditional students, and the promotion of their participation in higher education, was conceived by lecturers and managers within the context of a post-92 university setting. The key research questions revolved around the way non-traditional students

were understood, the challenges and constraint on managing a more diverse student population, the perceived integration and perceived needs of non-traditional students and any actions taken or proposed in relation to these.

Initially documents and field notes were repeatedly read in relation to these questions in order to identify key themes. This reading and categorising was done manually. Consideration was given to using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) to aid the coding process as I was already very familiar with one application (NUD.IST) and also had some acquaintance with ATLAS.ti. However I decided to sift and code manually on this occasion in order to remain close to the data and to avoid getting seduced by the technical proficiency of such systems, which although delivering some efficiencies I felt could lead to valuable time being spent on technicalities not directly related to the study.

There were some additional questions asked of the documents studied, namely, how were they authored, transmitted and received, what was their intended purpose and who was their intended audience? Keeping these questions to the forefront of my mind whilst reading the documents allowed the analysis to take full account of the social context in which the documents were produced and conveyed.

Using the research question frame the identification of themes in individual documents and field-notes later led to the identification of patterns across documents field-notes and interview transcriptions. These were considered in relation to the theoretical standpoints outlined and this analysis is presented in Chapter 7 which also provides a description of the case-study institution. Throughout this discussion the case study institution is referred to as 'Inter-U'.

Chapter 7: Findings and Discussion

7.1 The Case Study Institution

There is an acknowledged diversity of higher education institutions in the UK, in terms of history, current mission, portfolio of courses and research, and student characteristics (NCIHE, 1997). It is therefore important that, prior to the discussion of specific findings, the case study institution is described and some basic data presented in order to situate the university within the UK higher education sector.

7.1.1 Overview

Inter-U is a new university with a mission which emphasises professional education and employability. It was previously an Institute of Higher Education that was developed from the merger of a number of separate colleges. It was granted taught degree awarding powers in 1993 and was preparing an application for research degree awarding powers at the time of the study.

A multi-campus university, it was originally arranged into nine separate departments which were re-structured into five. Its portfolio of programmes had a strong vocational thrust and an emphasis was placed on the professional accreditation of programmes. The principal disciplinary areas in the university were art and design, health and care related disciplines, education, sport related disciplines and management.

7.1.2 The student population of Inter-U¹

The total student population of the university for the year in which the study began (2004-05) was 10015 and for the year in which the study was completed (2006-07) it was 10998. It was thus a relatively small university by UK standards and, in terms of Welsh universities, could be seen as 'mid range'. In the period 1996-97 to 2004-05 Inter-U had experienced a growth of 19%, but this was smaller than the level of growth in Wales (33%) and the UK (26%) generally.

Internal management information showed that Inter-U's international student population grew from 6% of the total student full-time equivalent population in 2003-04 to 12% in 2005 – 06. There was also a 5% increase in the percentage of postgraduate students during this time period, from 18% to 23%. A divestment of further education and sub-degree programmes and a growth in post-graduate research student numbers was a stated aim of the university, as noted in a strategic planning paper,

Recent prioritisation of the strategic development of research culture has seen us both divest of further education (FE) and sub-degree provision, and achieve growth in our postgraduate population. (Paper to Learning and Teaching Board)

Given that these increases occurred during and immediately prior to the study they may have impacted upon staff perspectives regarding the student population.

When the study began benchmark percentages derived from HESA performance indicators showed the university met or exceeded all indicators for the participation of both young and mature students from low participation neighbourhoods. However

¹ All data, unless stated otherwise, is taken from HESA.

when young students were categorised by social class (NS-SEC classes 4,5, 6 and 7) recruitment fell below the benchmark.

Benchmarks and sector comparisons for disabled students showed Inter-U as performing particularly well. For example, the figures for full-time, first degree students in 2003-4 were: UK = 3.1%, Wales = 4.4% InterU = 7.3%, Benchmark = 3.7%. . In 2003-4 the university had the nineteenth highest recorded percentage of disabled students in UK HEIs. Those recording higher percentages were mostly Arts Colleges with a high correlation between their subject portfolios and the incidence of specific learning difficulties. In Inter-U, as in many other UK universities a rise in the percentage of disabled students has been largely due to greater identification and recording of dyslexia. Inter-U has a department that includes the creative arts and, as has been noted in similar departments in other universities, the incidence of dyslexia is higher than in other disciplines (Davies, 2001; Association of Art Historians, 2003).

Comparable benchmarking data for ethnic minorities was not available from HESA at this time, however an internal progress report on widening participation showed that 5.6% of students were from ethnic minority groups and this was seen as exceeding a benchmark of 5% drawn from local census data.

7.1.3 Staffing

Finally, tables 7.1 and 7.2 below present the staffing profile of Inter-U based on data extracted from internal human resource records. These show the distribution of staff across managerial, academic and support roles and the diversity profile of staff.

Table 7.1 Distribution across managerial, academic and support roles

| ROLE | CURRENT FTE |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| SENIOR POST HOLDERS/MANAGERS | 33.0 |
| ACADEMIC STAFF | 369.8 |
| SUPPORT STAFF | 599.9 |
| TOTAL | 1002.7 |

Table 7.2 Diversity Profile of Staff

| | September-04 % | September-05 % | September-06 % |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Gender-all staff (M/F) | 50/50 | 47/53 | 46/54 |
| Gender-academic staff (M/F) | <i>Not available</i> | 55/45 | 55/45 |
| Gender-staff earning £44k+ (M/F) | 78/22 | 77/23 | 73/27 |
| Minority ethnic group - all | 5.6 | 8.6 | 8.5 |
| Declared disability - all | 2.3 | 3.5 | 3.3 |

7.2 Presentation of findings

The goal of the study was to reveal how constructions of widening access and non-traditional students were being played out within a new university through the articulation of local policies and through everyday understandings and actions. As already noted the data collection period spanned 20 months during which time data was collected by means of reviewing written documents, making observations, and interviewing managers and lecturers from two academic departments within the university. This use of multiple data sources was extremely beneficial as the use of

different sources aided interpretation and helped provide greater trust in the findings of the study.

It was recognised that these findings could be represented in a number of different ways and a decision was made that, in order to convey key finding clearly and accessibly, the original research questions would be used to structure the presentation. Accordingly, this Chapter presents the study findings under each research question. Following the discussion of each of these questions the main points are summarised and finally some further key points are made in relation to the theoretical ideas presented in Chapter 4. Thus, the discussion of findings begins with the way in which non-traditional students were defined in Inter-U. It presents what was found in relation to the question ‘Who are defined as non-traditional students in the institution, i.e. what groups are assumed to be involved the widening participation agenda?’ As there were some differences in the way non-traditional were defined in terms of potential students and in terms of the current student population of Inter-U, these are presented separately.

7.3 Definitions of non-traditional students: potential students

The review of literature revealed that the notion of a non-traditional student and associated idea of widening participation is complex and problematic due to the varying meanings that can be attached to such concepts. This ambiguity of meaning was evident in this study and has also been recognised as a feature of other related ideas such as ‘social exclusion’ (Levitas 1998; Tlili 2008). It has been argued that the widespread usage of such multifaceted ideas may be due to the flexibility they allow across divergent positions (Doherty, 2003). One manager discussing the variety of activities that could be placed under the banner of ‘widening access’ expressed this in

the comment that ‘...the waters are a bit muddy’. Divergent perspectives were also evident in the different discourses found within the university and a variety of different constructions of non-traditional students were found to co-exist. This is not to imply that the actual term ‘non-traditional students’ was frequently used, on the contrary, the term itself was only occasionally found in documents or raised in discussions. However, the limited direct use of the term ‘non-traditional students’ did not prevent discussions of how to increase access and promote the participation of particular groups i.e. there was direct reference to those students included as a result of widening participation policy. Frequently in such discussions there was an assumption that everyone understood which students were being talked about, so definition was unnecessary. Where reference was made to specific groups it was most often made in terms of policy targets and access figures.

The Corporate Plan (2005-09) was the overarching strategic document of the university and as such laid out the broad aims and aspirations of the institution. However, the audience for this plan was clearly not only those different groups within the institution, it also has an important functional role in representing the university to the funding council and government. These diverse audiences could be expected to influence the way in which activities and aspirations were conveyed. It is thus possibly not surprising that the first reference to widening participation found in the Corporate Plan was a commitment to contribute to ‘WAG’s targets’ followed by the stated goal of a percentage increase in ‘low participation groups’. The focus on targets and access numbers as a response to externally driven criteria was evident in several places, as illustrated by the statement

The essential measurement of [Inter-U’s] success in embedding WAP is the number of students recruited from underrepresented groups. We aim to increase the number of students from low participation

neighbourhoods by 30%, and to ensure that our performance in recruiting such students places us ahead of nationally published benchmarking information (Corporate Plan, 2005-09:10)

The specific reference to students from low participation neighbourhoods was significant as elsewhere in this document ‘underrepresented groups’ were largely undefined or, in one instance, when reference was made to the university’s commitment to equality and diversity a lengthy array of potential underrepresented groups were listed. The specific identification of students from low participation neighbourhoods was partly related to the WAG revision to its targets and new focus on students from the most socio-economically deprived parts of Wales, i.e. Communities First areas, rather than the previously identified low participation neighbourhoods. Discussions with managers within the university indicated that the institution was far more likely, given past recruitment, to be successful in recruiting from those areas categorised as low participation neighbourhoods than from Communities First Areas. So retaining this as a key target group was merely playing to a known strength.

A substantial revision made to the Corporate Plan during the study period further identified ‘...school children who have no family experience of HE’. In addition, those from ‘low participation neighbourhoods’ became those from ‘low participation areas’, possibly avoiding the previous distinction and allowing reference to Communities First Areas if required. The identification of ‘school children’ was an acknowledgement that many access focussed projects involved school intervention. Apart from these particular instances the majority of the corporate strategic documentation and discussion was somewhat vague in its reference to those for whom access strategies were being devised.

The Learning and Teaching Strategy (2003-2008) also made very limited reference to any specific 'non-traditional' student groups. This was explained within the documentation by the argument that the Widening Access and Participation Strategy (2002-05) underpinned the Learning and Teaching Strategy and was the official document where this issue was more fully addressed. The Widening Access and Participation Strategy itself was, unsurprisingly, far more explicit regarding the identification of specific groups. This was the document that was sent to the funding council as the public statement of the university's strategy on widening participation and therefore an alignment with policy was to be expected. A definition of widening participation groups was found in this document's statement of 'target groups'. Although the discussion in the document that preceded the statement of target groups took a rather broad-brush approach to the definition of underrepresented groups it did make a value based argument in reference to the need to make higher education available to '...older adults, less well-educated people in lower social, economic and occupational strata, women and dependent children, ethnic minority groups and people living in rural areas' (WAP Strategy, 2002-05:8). It also identified certain groups in relation to perceived good practice within the university, in particular mature students and disabled students. The target groups, however, were those which the strategy was 'targeted at recruiting and retaining'. These groups were:

- *young people from lower socio-economic groups, low participation neighbourhoods and/or with no previous higher education experience*
- *mature people with no higher education experience who come from low participation neighbourhoods*
- *people with disabilities*
- *people from minority ethnic groups*
(WAP Strategy, 2002-05:10)

Whilst it was interesting that these groups did not exactly mirror those referred to previously in the document the lack of congruence appeared to be partly explained by

the statement immediately following the identification of target groups. This, mirroring the Corporate Plan, referred to the university's objective to benchmark target groups against annually published performance indicator data. This indicated that definitions of non-traditional students were to some extent being influenced, at least for access purposes, by the metrics available to report performance.

The Widening Access and Participation Strategy was revised during the study and this included some revision of these target groups. The new targets specified those groups as being:

- *those living in Communities First areas,*
 - *first-degree entrants from NS-SEC classes 4,5,6 and 7,*
 - *students in receipt of DSA,*
 - *black and minority ethnic students, and*
 - *care leavers.*
- (WAP Strategy, 2006-09:para. 5.2.1)

The importance of metrics was still evident and, in the case of some target groups, could be seen to be more refined. Thus, 'people with disabilities' became 'students in receipt of DSA' and 'young people from lower socio-economic groups' became 'first degree entrants from NS-SEC classes 4, 5, 6 and 7'. In both cases the revised definition reflected the specific category for which benchmarking data was available. The inclusion of 'care leavers' came from the high profile promotion of the needs of this group by the Frank Buttle Trust and the subsequent focus by the WAG and HEFCW. This new focus was discussed in Learning and Teaching Board meetings and in Widening Access Forum meetings.

The funding council had also become more directive in requiring evidence of engagement with Communities First areas. For example, early in the study the funding council produced a summary of widening access strategies in Wales. This



summary clearly provided a steer for subsequent strategies and stated ‘...the *Reaching Higher* Communities First target is a key priority’. It was also reported in meetings of the Widening Access Forum that this target needed greater focus and, in a meeting with representatives of the funding council, a previous lack of attention to Communities First Areas was mentioned as a concern. In this meeting, in addition to concern regarding this target area reference was made to the premium funding that was available from the council and this provided a clear steer for strategic developments.

One other aspect of written statements on widening access was significant. This was the emphasis placed on the promotion of employability. Although employability and the provision of vocationally relevant courses was a general priority for the university it was referenced specifically in relation to widening access students. For example, in the Widening Access and Participation Strategy ‘learning recognition and development’ was seen as

an area of widening access activity the university plans to promote vigorously in the future in order to effectively respond to regional sector skills development needs and promote an expansion of part time recruitment of mature adults.

This indicated that the economic/vocational argument was being used in terms of both individual opportunity provision (‘recruitment of mature adults’) and the needs of the economy (‘regional sector skills development needs’). Also, in the Corporate Plan, the section on widening access specifically referred to the importance of guidance on successful application for employment. Such linking of widening access and the employability agenda was found throughout the corporate documentation and was often referred to in conversations regarding widening access strategy. This employability focus is discussed further in paragraph 7.8.

The discussion thus far has shown that widening access target groups, and, by implication, non-traditional students, although only vaguely defined in many areas, were explicitly identified in certain strategy documents. These identifications appeared to be largely based on external policy imperatives and measurement determined indicators. Identification of non-traditional students by such means could indicate that there had been only limited debate and understanding of the meaning of 'non-traditional' within the particular context. The wording of some corporate documents clearly showed the specific audience was the funding council. There were frequent assertions that WAG objectives were being pursued and attained, and documents were littered with phrases such as '...in recognition of WAG's wish...'. This sometimes left the reader with the impression that commitment was externally rather than internally driven and that the possibility of student diversity benefiting the institution had not been fully considered.

However, it was not necessarily the same groups of prospective students identified in corporate documents that were being encouraged to consider higher education within the framework of widening access activity. Apart from those managers directly involved in setting the targets and writing the strategy few staff knew precisely which groups Inter-U had targeted and a much wider interpretation of underrepresented groups, or non-traditional students, was being employed. Even in specific access strategy related activity there appeared to be a wide interpretation, perhaps reflecting the broader value-based discussion that was initially found in the Widening Access and Participation Strategy document. In this respect there was evidence of a great deal of highly positive activity being undertaken within local communities by a pro-active widening participation team. They were involved in a number of projects, often in collaboration with others, as part of the WAG 'Reaching Wider' initiative which

received separate funding from HEFCW. Such access focused activity was undoubtedly raising the profile of opportunities available to a wide variety of non-traditional potential entrants. Examples of such work included a range of external classes designed to engage adult learners, including retired learners and refugees; a Summer School with ‘taster’ courses held in communities where there was traditionally low participation in higher education (but not only Communities First areas); sessions in a local prison; community based activities with a range of ethnic minority groups and compact arrangements with schools serving underrepresented groups. Thus, the projects run by the widening access team covered a wider definition of non-traditional groups than did the documentation. It is debatable whether this wider definition was the result of considered thought being given to widening access groups or was opportunistic and it is likely that it was each of these, in part.

In a few cases it could be questioned whether activities defined as widening access were strictly *widening* access or simply *increasing* access, i.e. whether higher education was being made more accessible to previously underrepresented groups or simply to more people from the same groups. This was particularly the case for those activities reported from within the academic departments of the university, i.e. not those undertaken by the widening access team. It appeared that any activity concerned with raising the aspirations of children was viewed as widening access. In these instances defining underrepresented groups or non-traditional students appeared irrelevant as the activity was based on the premise that raising aspiration itself would widen access. Such activity was seen as allowing many schoolchildren, from all walks of life, to have greater insight into higher education. In this respect it could be argued that those with a lack of family experience of higher education would have the greatest benefit, however, it could also be argued that an assumption of this approach

is that non-traditional students are viewed as those lacking aspiration. This conjecture was further exemplified in the Corporate Plan which indicated strategies were needed ‘...to enable learners from underrepresented groups to overcome innate reticence about the cost and purpose of HE study’ (Corporate Plan, 2005-09: Appendix 2).

During the study many lecturers also discussed their interest in attracting a greater number of non-traditional students. This was often in the context of increasing course numbers and thus non-traditional students were defined as those most likely to be attracted to particular programmes. For example, lecturers from the care and housing professions spoke of their interest in ‘different’ students particularly ‘returners’ because their programmes did not attract school leavers. A number of others identified widening access with the recruitment of international students. The university had a history of strong international recruitment to certain courses and a number of lecturers and managers clearly saw this recruitment as part of their commitment to widening access. In two out of the three paired interviews with staff from health and care disciplines the first group identified as non-traditional students were international students. It has been recognised that there is an increase in targeted recruitment strategies being undertaken by universities in order to benefit from these markets (Lasanowski and Verbik, 2007) and an increased focus on internationalisation strategy (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2007). Such strategic developments were evident in Inter-U at the time of the study so it was not surprising that these students were identified. Those lecturers and managers in Inter-U who identified international students as a significant widening access group generally rationalised this in terms of their ethnic minority status in the UK. As one manager stated:

The School has always had a long tradition of trying to accommodate students who I would call non-traditional in terms of [pause] –it is a question of terminology - but in terms of, certainly ethnic minorities. You have some programmes in the School that have very significant numbers of overseas students. ... from Oman and to a lesser extent other Middle Eastern countries. (MH)

Although international student recruitment was highlighted by some lecturers and managers, in line with developing corporate strategy, others did not mention this group even when specifically asked who they believed were non-traditional students. This diversity in perceptions of non-traditional students appeared to be linked to conditions in the local context of lecturers' work and was also evident in discussions regarding the current student population.

7.4 Definitions of non-traditional students: current students

The limited identification of specific non-traditional student groups found in corporate strategy documents, apart from the Widening Access and Participation Strategy, was also found in Learning and Teaching Board discussions. In both cases, widening participation issues were dealt with at a very high level of generality in terms of the student groups being considered. Whilst strategies aimed at the diverse student population, such as retention plans and study support, were discussed in these meetings the nature of diversity was largely unspoken. There was one major exception to this. This was the specific discussion of disabled students which occurred as a result of there being a dedicated disability services team located within a Student Services Unit and which had representation on the Board. Thus reports were received regarding the disabled student population and, in particular, members of the Board were informed of legislative requirements. The other reason that this group was specifically identified was because the university was performing particularly well in respect of this target group. Comments were made regarding the

positive showing of the university in respect of benchmark data and it was claimed that the university continued ‘...to enjoy a strong reputation for its work for disability support’. As one manager rather over enthusiastically stated ‘we are one of the best HEIs in Great Britain in the area of disability’.

It was in the Equality and Diversity Committee meetings that groupings were identified rather more explicitly and this identification was made on the basis of legislative requirements. A number of equality groups had been formed to report to the committee. These groups were based on legislation and were: race, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief. The approach taken by this committee was mainly focused on the workforce rather than students and could be seen as taking an equality audit approach. Thus the major work of the committee during the study included the presentation of equalities reports to fulfil statutory responsibilities, information on new legislation, and training programme provision. Student information was provided in terms of an audit of student withdrawal in which students were categorised according to information available on registration. These categories were gender, disability, and ethnicity. This did provide some opportunity to analyse the retention of non-traditional students (when defined according to the stated categories) and to consider whether rates of withdrawal needed further investigation. However during the study period the major issues considered at this committee were staff related. It could be argued that the equality auditing approach that was taken by this committee could simply be seen as ensuring there was minimal compliance. Although this committee appeared to be putting some potentially useful systems in place reports to the committee did seem to show aspects of what Morrison (2007:329) has termed ‘weary compliance’. However it was a developing committee that was gradually putting equalities training and systems in place. During the study

period there was little discussion in this committee that was directly related to the research questions, but the categories that were largely employed by the committee for equalities purposes were those defined by statutory duties and available information.

Within Inter-U, as in most universities, the student profile varied between departments and even between courses within departments. One manager made the point that different subject areas attracted different groups, so those perceived as non-traditional in one area could be seen as traditional in another. Although, rather avoiding the general evidence of under-representation in higher education, this point was reiterated on several different occasions and by different people in Inter-U. In some respects it reflected the known complexities of subject specific differences in representation as noted in Chapter 3. For example, in one health-related subject group, two female lecturers interviewed explained that there were only ever two or three men in a group of 30 students and that all lecturers were female. They pointed to other areas with a similar profile and how clearly they believed that in these instances it was men that were the non-traditional students within the group.

Those outside particular subject groupings also believed that students were likely to be identified as non-traditional relative to the subject area rather than in terms of under-representation in higher education. An audio-taped discussion with a group of women working in a central support unit was undertaken in the preliminary stage of the study and an extract from this illustrates this point. After talking about the changes they believed were occurring in terms of the student population and the variations across the university, the following exchange took place.

Speaker 1. *I mean think of courses such as Social Work, Community Ed. Non-traditional is their traditional. Yeah? -in the bigger sense of what they say they are. [pause] You have to be a mature student to complete the course. So for them it is the norm. Whereas for others it is not...*

Speaker 2 *...I think you know the Business [department] has a lot of mature students, non-traditional and so forth*

Speaker 3 *Yeah and non-UK*

Speaker 1 *So I think certain departments are used to having them and certain [departments] aren't. But then... why are they non-traditional? If that [department] is used to having them? You see what I mean.*

The first speaker had a role in supporting student retention across the university and, despite questioning whether students should be seen as non-traditional in certain academic departments, believed that there were those departments that were more sympathetic to the widening access agenda by virtue of both the values presumed to underpin their subject area and their student intake, and, equally, there were those departments that were not. This belief was shared by others who made similar references to the department in which a number of health and care courses were located as being particularly receptive to non-traditional students. One other department was singled out in the discussion with the women from the support unit as being the least receptive and comments were made by other managers, lecturers and support staff confirming this perception. Also, when members of the widening access and participation team were asked what they thought was meant by some previous Learning and Teaching Board minutes that referred to some academic departments being 'highly responsive' to the widening access agenda and 'some less so' this particular department was named as the 'least responsive'. This department contained a number of sport related courses and, as stated in Chapter 6, in the latter stage of the study interviews were undertaken with individuals from the two departments viewed as representing either end of the 'responsiveness' continuum. It was interesting that

the staff interviewed from the department identified as not receptive to widening access appeared very supportive of a range of non-traditional student groups in higher education, rather, it was the circumstances of the department, in terms of its recruitment profile, that seemed to present this view to others.

The difference between the two departments, which was openly acknowledged by staff delivering sport related courses, appeared to be the relative pressure to recruit from widening access groups. Whereas, for some courses in the health and care department, non-traditional student recruitment was necessary for viability the sport related courses were already highly attractive to potential students. This was expressed by one sport lecturer when he said ‘I don’t think we are encouraged to look at a wide range of students institutionally because we are relatively over-subscribed anyway’. This view, that it was the high level of competition for places that led to complacency regarding widening access, was widely held amongst the staff in this department. There was also a general acceptance of the view expressed in a later comment by the same lecturer that ‘I think the staff would be supportive of a far wider range of interests and abilities than we have’. Other evidence from interviews, conversations and observations confirmed that this department differed not because of a lack of concern with making higher education available to a wider constituency but because of the lack of an imperative to actively engage in seeking to recruit underrepresented groups for ‘business’ reasons. In one interview I enquired ‘Have I got this right -it's not a huge focus because you recruit okay?’ and the response was ‘Yes - whether those people apply or not - if they do apply we are happy to take them on, but it just goes back to that application stage’.

This, to some extent, mirrors the different contexts of new and older, more prestigious, universities insofar as the latter do not face the same issues of recruitment and can place greater reliance on marketing through reputation. Also, just as the continued disparity in access figures between types of university is disguised by national access targets, so university performance, using benchmark figures can disguise differences between departments. However, as will be seen, the imperative placed on those in other departments to seek recruitment from non-traditional student groups was not always viewed positively

The interviews in the two academic departments showed that some specific groups of students were consistently identified as non-traditional regardless of department whereas the identification of others appeared to be related to the local context of the course. All the lecturers and managers interviewed discussed disabled students as one category of non-traditional student and particularly highlighted issues of dyslexia. As already mentioned, a high profile was given to disability within the university and this probably influenced perception. However, the consistent reference to students with dyslexia appeared to derive from the ways in which the management of dyslexia was understood by lecturers. This will be discussed further in section 7.6.

Mature students were also consistently identified and, were the only group that in all cases, were portrayed as making a positive contribution to the learning environment. Lecturers that taught large cohorts of mainly 18 to 21-year-olds were particularly positive regarding mature students. Typical comments were:

I do think if you have a mature student in the group who does have these life skills there is somebody else saying what you're saying. I think it does add a different dimension to the group. (SFe1)

and

I think mature students are worth their weight in gold in the teaching situation because they've got so many other experiences that they can draw on. About 95% of our intake come from similar backgrounds and similar life experiences and you ask them some general questions and they've got nothing to draw on. (SMm2)

The positive regard for mature students thus appeared to be linked to the contribution they could be relied on to make within the teaching situation, whether this was supporting the lecturer ('saying what you're saying') or bringing new perspectives. A number of lecturers believed there were fewer mature students on their courses than previously and were saddened by this.

The only other group that was consistently identified was minority ethnic groups, although this was more often a passing reference rather than a discussion that drew on experience. The impression was given that lecturers thought it was important to indicate their knowledge of the inequality suffered by minority ethnic groups but it wasn't something people wished, or were able, to discuss. An unelaborated 'we don't get very many ethnic minorities...' was a typical statement. Also, in the health and care related department the term was most often associated with international students whereas this was not the case in the sport related department. It is interesting to reflect upon the possible reasons for this group only being identified in a peripheral way. Both the Widening Access and Participation Strategy and its revision had explicitly named this group of students and, some argue, it is this group that have experienced the most marked inequalities in our education system (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). The reticence may have been due to lecturers concerns regarding the sensitivity of the issue or it may have been due to their limited experience together

with some awareness of this being one non-traditional group that the university was not seen as having had particular success at recruiting, apart from internationally.

Interestingly the group of students most commonly discussed by lecturers from the health and care department in relation to widening access were those who ‘...didn’t really make the grade’. These students were variously referred to as those ‘with low A levels’, ‘without any formal qualifications’, and with ‘no academic background’. It was interesting that whilst the health and care lecturers all spoke at length about these students when discussing those accessing the university as a result of widening access policy the lecturers from the sport department did not classify widening access students in this way. A difference in working definitions of non-traditional students again appeared to be influenced by the different pressures on each department emanating from the marketability of their courses.

The relevance of course numbers to staff in the health and care department was evident in my conversation with the two male lecturers with extensive experience. One started talking about his recent involvement in a foundation programme. He saw this as meeting the university’s ‘widening access agenda’ and also ‘serving us well in terms of our student numbers’. When they started talking about non-traditional students’ need for tutorial support I asked who they thought were the widening access students. I offered the comment that they had mentioned ‘part-timers’, ‘mature students’ and those who needed foundation degrees to ‘make the grade’ or ‘change stream’ and enquired whether they thought there were any other groups. They responded:

Speaker 1: *No, no I don't think there are any other real...(HMe2)*

Speaker 2: *No, no I mean what we have found again is... both [colleague's name] and I are programme directors and come clearing time I mean it can be a little bit worrying whether you're going to meet your targets or not. (HMe1)*

The first speaker later went on to say that '...of course in the broadest sense - of widening access - are our international students', and further into the discussion they talked about disabled students. However, the meaning of non-traditional students and widening access policy was experienced most acutely in relation to achieving course numbers, meeting 'your targets', and this often meant providing access opportunities for students with less academic qualifications. In certain cases lecturers experienced this as providing access to students who should not be in university.

In an interview with two female lecturers from the same department one stated that the change she had seen in higher education in relation to widening access was 'more and more students without any formal qualifications'. Her colleague explained:

...we've had a number of non-traditional students who perhaps are [pause] you know, not [pause]. They don't quite meet the expectations of the entry criteria. They're just about there if you like, but it's very clear right at the beginning in the first term that they haven't got the intellectual capacity to actually achieve what they need to achieve. (HFm2)

The final pair of lecturers interviewed in this department also recognised a pressure on some courses to increase numbers but one felt protected because she worked on a professional bursary funded course that had numbers capped.

As noted those lecturers interviewed from the department running sports related courses did not discuss these characteristics and were not under pressure to attract more students. These lecturers all mentioned another

classification which was that of students on 'low income'. This seemed to stem from a greater awareness of students' financial difficulty owing to the visibility of students' financial means in relation to others taking the sport courses. For example, the majority of students on these courses lived on campus whereas some students could not afford this and were perceived as suffering as a consequence. Thus, certain definitions of non-traditional students were more meaningful to lecturers owing to the local context in which they operated.

7.5 Summary: definitions of non-traditional students

In terms of recruitment, at the corporate and strategic level non-traditional students were largely defined by policy directives and the ability to represent performance through available benchmarking data. Although serving to ensure higher education institutions are responsive to the wider political agenda it is possible that such external imperatives serve to minimise internal discussion and debate about the need for widening access and the specific meaning within the university. There was evidence of a wider definition being employed in recruitment practice but it was uncertain as to whether this came about opportunistically or through such discussion.

Within the institution disabled students and mature students were consistently identified as belonging to the category of non-traditional students. Minority ethnic students, although also recognised as non-traditional, were not discussed by interviewees in any detail. Apart from these groups the definition of non-traditional student appeared to depend on the local context. In one context studied students with lower qualifications were highlighted as the most

significant group and in another context disabled students and those from families on low income were those most readily identified.

7.6 The needs of non-traditional students

Within Inter-U a widely stated concern was the provision of support for students in the form of generic study skills and personal tuition, for example, the Learning and Teaching Strategy noted the importance of ‘...a supportive and effective learning environment for an increasingly diverse student population’ (Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2003-2008:11). The Corporate Plan also identified a key goal of widening participation as being to provide underrepresented groups with ‘...support mechanisms which help ensure their success as students’(Corporate Plan, 2005-09:10). Most commonly such support was seen as the provision of basic academic skills which were assumed to meet the needs of non-traditional students. In the strategy documents considered and the formal meetings attended an emphasis on the need for greater central provision of generic academic skills was presented by reference to two issues. The first of these was the benefit such support would have in promoting autonomous ‘student-centred’ learning. For example, one paper on developing support presented at the Learning and Teaching Board acknowledged ‘...that student-centred approaches to learning must be supported by increased learner-support mechanisms and resources’. In discussions and conversations it was revealed that the provision of support was also assumed to have the added advantage of giving lecturers more time to spend on activities other than teaching, because students would be better equipped to study alone. This particular conception of being ‘student centred’ was initially identified in a comment in the Corporate Plan which, in addition to noting some pedagogical benefits of student-centred learning, stated that ‘...the pressures created by a mass HE system require [Inter-U] to promote student-

centred learning' (Corporate Plan, 2005-09:14) . It was thus at least implied that the approach was partly driven by efficiency reasons. The second issue was the presumed impact study skills support would have on retention figures and, in arguing this papers presented to the Boards clearly showed that retention was viewed as one of the key indicators of the successful implementation of the widening access and participation agenda.

Schools presented specific retention plans on an annual basis to the Learning and Teaching Board, in these study skills was the area most frequently mentioned for development in both 2005 and 2006. Both the Corporate Strategic Plan and the Learning and Teaching Strategy emphasised 'learner support' in the context of facilitating 'autonomous learning' and such support was linked to the retention agenda and thus, by implication, to widening access. In the Widening Access and Participation Strategy the link was explicit and highlighted '...the need to pay closer attention to improving support mechanisms for students to ensure that they have the best chance to succeed' (WAP Strategy, 2006-09: para. 1.3). Such support, which as already stated was principally seen as the provision of study skills, was often viewed as remedying a deficit in those students that were admitted to courses.

In a discussion with central support unit staff one, commenting on this focus on study skills, claimed that most departments '...see it as being remedial, as an introduction in the first year.' They also indicated that they thought this concern may have arisen from lecturers' worries about the capabilities of non-traditional students. As another said, 'I think perhaps staff can have a view that diversity and you know...uum... encouraging wider involvement from different communities might mean lowering standards'. Whilst this concern was certainly evident in some discussions with

individual members of academic staff the interviews conducted during the study revealed noticeable differences in perceptions regarding the need for study skills.

Three views could be distinguished. The first, and that which did show a concern with the lowering of standards, saw non-traditional students as less capable and needing additional help with areas such as literacy and numeracy. Study skills were necessary but a doubt was expressed as to whether the deficit could be remedied.

...they struggle with writing the essay and we find – even if you give them specific tutorials – they do have study skills lectures on our course and a have [Inter-U] study skills lectures that they can go on to – and they still struggle. And they're still having problems. If they manage to scrape through to the second year they continue with problems like that and I think, to be honest, a lot of them leave, and we're setting them up to go. (HFm2)

This view was frequently expressed without explicit reference to any particular category of non-traditional student; rather there was some general reference made to student diversity and widening access. As one manager stated when discussing the influence of Inter-U's commitment to widening participation.

One of the things we could do with is more generic study skills support. We don't have time to take students through the basic study skills they require and you can easily detect it you know basic grammatical errors - maths is another one. (MH)

As discussed previously when looking at the definition of non-traditional students it sometimes appeared that it was the very need for those skills that defined the student as non-traditional, i.e. they were defined by the deficit of academic skills, rather than by their membership of any of the underrepresented groups referenced in government policy. This view was most prominent when talking to staff who taught on courses that had recruitment difficulties.

However such pessimism about the ability of students to ‘make the grade’ was not as common as the view, expressed by lecturers in both departments where interviews were conducted, that non-traditional students although lacking proficiency in some academic skills did have potential. The following comments, the first from a lecturer in health care and the second from a lecturer sport, illustrate this.

I'm not saying they don't have the intelligence or the ability... but what they don't have is the tools of the trade. They don't have the skills...(HFm1)

*There are a lot of problems with the experience people have out there in order for us to be able to bring them in a so to speak.....
Not that I'm suggesting that they aren't able to write an essay ...you know... but their academic support needs might be more than those who come through a sort of traditional A-level route. So I think that study skills is quite a big issue (SFe2)*

Those lecturers with this perspective still argued that there was a need for non-traditional students to be provided with additional support for study, however, they reasoned that that this was due to previous experience rather than innate capability. The provision of such support was thus viewed as a necessary underpinning for students to be able to study and meet course requirements effectively. Accordingly, this view was often expressed in calls for ‘level zero’ modules in order to equip students with the necessary foundational skills and understanding.

The third view regarding the provision of study skills explicitly separated the need for such provision from the widening access agenda. In one interview two sport lecturers discussed their belief that A-levels had changed and were not providing sufficient grounding for university. They believed students were ‘daunted’ by essays due to their ‘limited vocabularies’ and did not see this as simply an issue about the skills of non-traditional students. One lecturer who described himself as having been a ‘non-traditional student’ held the contrary view that

'...if you're talking about exclusion sometimes the kids who are most well read are the kids from working-class backgrounds who will make an effort. With the rest it is a very "Home and Away" speak. A very limited range of responses such as "cool".' (SMm1)

A number of other lecturers similarly spoke of their concern that A-levels were not providing students with the skills for independent learning and proficiency in essay writing whether students were from 'traditional' backgrounds or not and that '...a number of students come in at level 1 – they have their UCAS points –they meet the tariff – but a number of these tend to be quite weak in say literacy' (HMe1). Thus the need for study skills was advocated more broadly than just in terms of widening access. These different perspectives clearly have implications for the way in which such support for study should be provided.

In addition to the need for study support comment was made on the financial needs of a number of non-traditional students. The provision of bursaries and financial advice was recognised but many lecturers saw this as 'a drop in the ocean' and were aware of students having to work and not being able to attend as fully as they believed they should. On two occasions lecturers provided stories of students struggling to manage and expressed their own feeling of awkwardness and powerless to do anything about it. As one stated,

I signed the hardship form for a student the other day. We shouldn't be in the position where somebody has to download a form and say 'Can I claim for this please?' I don't want to know, I don't want to know... Somebody should make sure she's got all she needs to study here comfortably. I felt desperately sorry for her, it isn't right, you should be able to have all you need to study... I'm not a great fan of students having to work when they are in university. To do it properly they need all that time. (SMm2)

The unease expressed by this lecturer was found elsewhere in relation to other non-academic issues. Lecturers presented a picture of being drawn into more personal and

pastoral relationships with students and frequently feeling some discomfort about this.

In addition to general study skills and financial needs the particular support needs of disabled students were specifically mentioned by a number of lecturers during the study. In general, the view was expressed by staff across the university that the central resource for disability services was appreciated by academics and disability was at the forefront of the widening access agenda. In interviews both lecturers and managers claimed that their disciplinary areas had a particular understanding of the needs of disabled students. So, the manager from the health and care department emphasised that disability was always ‘...taken seriously as would be expected’ (MH) in a department such as theirs. Equally a sport lecturer believed there was ‘... a more easy acceptance of a range of physical disability... because of the whole nature of Special Olympics ...or rather the Paralympics’ (SFe1). Such needs were most frequently identified in terms of physical resources such as the height of laboratory tables and wheelchair access to lecture theatres although some occasional references were made to curricula change. (These will be discussed further in Section 7.8 on responses to greater diversity). The manager of the central disability services revealed in conversation that she believed lecturers in sport were more confident than others when dealing with physical disability as they had more experience of students with physical disabilities than had other departments. This was an interesting comment given the view of others that there was some reticence about widening access in this particular academic department. However, she also believed there could be some insensitivity from the lecturers in this discipline when the disability was not visible.

Such unseen disabilities and the increasing demands of supporting them was mentioned by several lecturers who also commented on students' 'mental health problems' and the need to provide what one termed 'emotional first aid'. A rise in the number of students with mental ill-health had also been recognised in the additional resource provided for a mental health worker within the disability services team.

The most controversial area discussed regarding disability and students' needs concerned dyslexia. In common with other universities Inter-U had seen a significant rise in the number of students with dyslexia. This rise has been partly associated with increased incentives to disclose (Riddell et al., 2005). A number of lecturers expressed some concern about the increasing number of students with dyslexia and that concern took a number of forms. Some expressed a degree of cynicism about students wishing to be labelled dyslexic in order to receive additional support and consideration. Thus, the comment was made that,

I think if you ask people to comment on wheelchairs, mobility, deafness all that stuff I think they would be very very supportive. Whether people are as supportive of less easily identified and a little bit more contentious disabilities I don't know. (SMm2)

This lecturer went on to relay the following story.

I've got to get it off my chest there was a classic last week. I was e-mailing back and forth about a particular student who has dropped back a year and has failed the dyslexia test. Now he should be rejoicing -- he has no disability. Instead of that it's 'What are we going to do now? Somebody's got to tell him that he's not very bright.'
Our first port of call is to stick this label on him and we can give him a computer, 25% extra time and all this extra support. And now we can't do that. So now what are we going to do? It's someone who just doesn't make the grade and doesn't apply himself. It's almost a crisis. (SMm2)

A number of lecturers appeared to have a similar scepticism about diagnoses of dyslexia. As one said '...we've had I don't know how many in our classes that are dyslexic, huge numbers because, the word again gets out that they'll have a free

laptop, and we find it very difficult' (HFm1) She added 'I'm sure a lot of students, who aren't dyslexic get pushed through the borderline into the dyslexic category'. Also, increases in student numbers and limited resources combined with a lack of scientific consensus on dyslexia (Rice and Brooks, 2004) fed lecturers' doubts and appeared to lead to some confusion regarding appropriate support. As one lecturer questioned when discussing support for students with dyslexia, '...do you accommodate when you're marking, or is it already accommodated and who is there to explain?' (SFe2) This confusion was shown to exist on a number of other occasions and across disciplines, despite an explicit answer to this question being available the university's regulations. Expressing a similar confusion regarding whether the provision of additional examination time was the only accommodation that needed to be made her colleague raised the widely held concern that additional support could compromise 'fairness'. Replying to the comment of her colleague that 'people don't know what to do' she stated:

Yes and they might know what to do but not necessarily agree with it. They might think that being a dyslexic you've already had the support you need in the time you've got. There could be a student that is borderline that needs that support and doesn't get it. So you've got to draw the line about how much support you give one student and another. You may be majorly advantaging that student.

Similar findings to this are indicated by Kerr (2001: 82) in a small study of adult basic education. In Kerr's study tutors showed

...very considerable confusion and uncertainty as to what dyslexia might be, what might indicate it, what might cause it, what to do about it and even whether it existed at all.

However, in Inter-U scepticism about the existence of dyslexia was not universal. On occasion, the heightened awareness of dyslexia was shown by a concern that it was probably more prevalent than recognised owing to a number of students being unwilling to disclose and incur the stigma that was believed to exist. A manager in

the health and care department gave the example of ‘a very bright student’ who despite his advice refused to be assessed. He believed she could have improved on what was a good degree classification had she received the support to which she was entitled. This view, that some students would not disclose dyslexia, was expressed on other occasions and a number of lecturers were making efforts to identify and support students in this respect. This was particularly the case in the department of art and design which had the highest incidence of dyslexia and in which a diagnosis of dyslexia appeared to be far more accepted.

The disability services manager had commented on the higher profile given to dyslexia in recent years and believed that lecturers generally understood that they had a responsibility. However, she was also aware of the previously mentioned scepticism and commented that every year she had to ‘reassure’ some staff that ‘dyslexia does exist’, that the educational psychologist wasn’t just ‘...on some job creation scheme for himself, and that the students he does identify do have genuine needs’. She also recognised the under-confidence of some staff and a need for further training in this area.

7.7 Summary: perceptions of non-traditional students’ needs

Responses to identifying needs varied greatly, however the needs of non-traditional students were principally, but not universally, seen as being concerned with study skills, with the attendant assumption that non-traditional students were deficient in such skills. The provision of such skills was also viewed as necessary to aid retention and allow greater autonomous learning.

Need deriving from financial hardship was also recognised and seen as requiring to be addressed on a wider scale than was possible within the university. However the implementation of some Inter-U systems designed to help with student hardship was seen as needing further consideration, particularly in relation to the role played by academic staff. In many cases it appeared that academic staff were being faced with greater non-academic needs and felt uncomfortable with this.

Comments were made on the practical needs of physically disabled students and these were believed to be generally well addressed. Lecturers did, however, express anxiety about increasing mental ill health in the student population.

The most contentious needs identified were those of students with dyslexia. Dyslexia was a contested issue and some academics saw it as a strategy for gaining unfair advantage. Particular anxieties were expressed around the possibility of dyslexic students being given an advantage when others, who were just as 'needy', were not.

7.8 Actions taken in response to greater diversity

A key question for the study was whether lecturers and managers were developing different practices in response to non-traditional students. Given government targets and a policy focus on the increased representation of particular groups within universities it is perhaps not surprising that, at the corporate level, the greatest amount of activity was directed toward the admission of non-traditional students. Examples of access activity have already been given but one illustration of this emphasis on pre-entry activity revealed itself in a strategic report on widening access presented at the Learning and Teaching Board. In a word count of this report on progress in relation to widening access and participation 3238 words were concerned with access activities

whilst 101 were related to retention and learning support and 285 to other equality and diversity initiatives. Access activity was used to demonstrate compliance with funding council requirements and provide examples of engagement with traditionally recognised endeavours to meet widening participation targets. This emphasis on outreach and recruitment also helped in the demonstration of performance targets. As a previous review of widening access initiatives revealed, outreach activities tend to be easier to identify and cost than those in other categories (J. M. Consulting, 2005).

Apart from access some other relevant provision has already been alluded to in the previous discussion. So, for example, central provision had been made for a disability team to support both students and academic staff and financial advice and assistance was available. Both services were highly regarded by academic staff, however, the manager of the centrally provided disability support did question the location of this service. The disability unit was located alongside other student services, such as financial advice, careers advice, counselling and the chaplaincy. The manager believed that disability support should be primarily concerned with curriculum issues not support services and, whilst acknowledging some more generic issues such as physical access, maintained the fundamental importance of curriculum accessibility. As she stated ‘...if we can make that [the curriculum] accessible then all the other bits will just become part and parcel of it’. She expressed a desire for her team to have a transformative role but felt that academic staff wanted them to be more ‘hands on’. Whilst she maintained that she understood their reasons, she also felt this direct provision approach was simply ‘fire-fighting’. Discussing this she explained

I suppose what it identifies is that they feel they need more support and we are the department that they would get that from. We feel unable to give them the amount of support that they potentially would need

because we are just trying to hold it together in the department.... all the developmental and profile raising work we would have done has fallen off to a large extent.

She thus believed that academic staff needed increasing support to respond to the needs of disabled students and this was being expressed as a requirement for the disability unit to directly address disabled students' needs. This separation of the work of the team was seen as being detrimental to a more integrated, developmental and potentially transformative approach.

Another central activity was, unsurprisingly given the identification of need previously discussed, the provision of study skills and a similar issue regarding the separation of support for non-traditional students arose in relation to this provision. There had been a number of discussions at the Learning and Teaching Board regarding the need to support students in their acquisition of basic academic skills. On most occasions these discussions made links to widening access and usually entailed some discussion of the additional demands placed on lecturers. It also generally included a bid for additional central resources to be made available. Discussions of the need for resources were successful in that funding was made available in the Libraries division for a new appointment to co-ordinate the provision of study support across the university. A particular departure in the discussions came when the newly appointed co-ordinator presented the strategic statement that such 'learner support' was to be directed at 'whole cohorts' and that

Learners with identifiable difficulties will not be remedialised away from their cohorts as isolated groups or individuals, and should no longer need to be directed to private consultations about work in crisis... (Paper to the Learning and Teaching Board).

This was an explicit attempt to adopt an 'academic literacies' approach in opposition to what was seen as a prevailing 'study skills' approach. These different approaches

have been defined in the literature (Lea and Street, 1998) with study skills approaches being seen as basically assuming ‘... that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts’ (p.158). Lea and Street also identify the ‘academic socialisation’ perspective in which ‘the task of the tutor/adviser is to induct students into a new 'culture', that of the academy’ (p.159). Finally, the academic literacies approach is seen as recognising that students have to ‘to switch [literacy] practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes’ (p.159). This final approach, which was being advocated by the new learning support co-ordinator, recognises that non-traditional students may not have the cultural capital required by higher education owing to their previous literacy practices.

The strategic paper on learning support explicitly questioned the adequacy of the study skills approach and claimed this was based on a deficit model. The ‘mainstreaming’ approach that was advocated as an alternative raised issues about separate and integrated forms of learning support and, at least implicitly, questioned a number of established support activities that fell into the ‘separate’ category. Such separate activity has been acknowledged to have some strength, such as allowing a safe environment to acquire skills and build confidence and it can be argued that the attention given to study skills has at least provided learning opportunities and access to ‘the tricks of the trade’ that were previously denied minority sectors of the HE population (Burns and Sinfield, 2004). However, the approach can also have some severe limitations such as having the potential to stigmatise (Warren, 2002). Within Inter-U such support activities had taken the form of workshops and a ‘drop-in’

facility. Those responsible for these activities had some reservations about the new approach and the critique it implied of current provision.

An interesting aspect of this debate was that academics within departments showed little interest in the differences of opinion and were primarily concerned that additional support was made available, whatever form that support took. Although, as previously stated, there were different perspectives on the need for additional learning support there appeared to be little consideration of the way in which such support was supplied. Equally, little consideration appeared to be given to the possible implications of an academic literacies approach for course delivery. This seemed to indicate that academic staff were unaware of the potential impact of different approaches for non-traditional students, and/or that pressure on their time led them to view any support in this area as at least alleviating one area of their responsibility.

The support activity discussed above was not the only form of response to greater diversity. One manager spoke of there being ‘...issues coming from an increase in non-traditional students impacting both on the delivery of support and on the curriculum itself’ (HM). An area in which support and curricula were both involved was the development of ‘level zero’ courses. As previously discussed, these courses were generally seen as being necessary to provide students with foundational skills and understanding, however a minority view was also that such courses would provide an additional ‘filter’ to ensure students were capable. One lecturer aired the view that this was a necessary precaution when admitting non-traditional students.

I think that level zero is a way that universities could go across the board. So that if you've got students from non-traditional backgrounds who haven't got [pause] I'm not saying that some of our traditional students, young students with 3 A levels and reasonable grades, still don't achieve what they should be achieving, they also fail and fail

miserably sometimes and put no effort into it, but it's usually for different reasons, it's usually they're on the wrong degree or they really don't want to do it or they just go out and spend too much time drinking. But I think for the other students, I think a level zero would sort out, if you like, the wheat from the chaff...(HFm2)

This perspective clearly distinguished traditional and non-traditional students in terms of the nature of provision required. It also drew on notions that non-traditional students are primarily those with lower qualifications and less ability and that additional selection mechanisms are required to ensure they have the necessary attributes. This reflected the previously mentioned concern that widening participation might mean lowering standards, a concern that Haggis, (2007:523) has termed 'defensive cynicism'. Whilst this view was apparent in a number of instances, more generally, the development of level zero courses was seen as necessary to facilitate widening access through providing those skills that students required the opportunity to develop and, importantly, for which the necessary funding was available.

Other actions that lecturers saw as being responsive to non-traditional students were described as making 'individual' adjustments to delivery. For example, one lecturer illustrated how the course team dealt with the difficulties some mature students faced in the following extract.

I think we handle things on an individual basis quite often. And, as I said, it's sometimes to do with [pause]. Like we've had some mature students, and I'm talking about late twenties early thirties, who are single parents. So what we have to accommodate is their inability to attend on a regular basis. Now what the issue for us is, whilst they are willing, they want to be here to learn, but sometimes those things prevent them. How do we accommodate that? One student deferred for a year because her child was too young, she was going through very personal issues and she wasn't able to engage in the course so we suggested that she defer. Another student who is currently going through[pause]she's travelling quite a long way [pause]...in fact today I just had a conversation with one of my colleagues suggesting that student has to go part-time so that the pressure is taken off her

instead of coming four days a week she just does two days a week over two years... (Sfe2)

This lecturer and her colleague spoke of various situations in which adjustments had been made on an individual basis to allow changes to the way in which students took particular modules, for example, talking about two ‘wheelchair athletes’ on the course it was explained that:

We had a one-to-one meeting ... in fact there were several one-to-one meetings, from different module perspectives, trying to accommodate them and changing the course content. If I use [another lecturer's] module for example, outdoor pursuits, trying to change the activities and the routes so that they have access. (Sfe1)

In this conversation it was also recognised that such individual changes were necessary because courses were largely designed for able-bodied, ‘traditional’ students. Later in the conversation one of the lecturers spoke of another colleague who had worked with the same two students and had made similar adjustments.

...it was a great concern not because she is not used to working with people with disabilities but because of the nature of what we had designed - the actual teaching- didn't fit in with how she could accommodate them. But she found a way around it. (Sfe1)

Such changes were frequently referred to by lecturers and managers across the university, as one manager stated when asked about responses to diversity “They do things on an individual basis and it depends on the relationship with an individual member of staff (SM). The approach that was being taken, the finding ‘a way around it’, showed a willingness to change practices when confronted with difference but an uncertainty about how this should be done in any proactive and developmental sense. As was remarked by one lecturer in relation to making changes to accommodate students’ needs ‘I think the staff need probably more support than the actual students in some respects’(Sfe2).

Although there was little evidence of more anticipatory and planned activity which explicitly addressed diversity issues in the curriculum the individual adjustments to course delivery were not the only actions taken. There were some limited examples of activities within courses that deliberately sought to utilise the experience of non-traditional students and could be seen as taking an empowerment approach. One of the least experienced lecturers from the health and care department gave the example of students who had chronic illnesses. She discussed her experience of lecturing on issues associated with such illness and commented on how she would alert particular students if relevant beforehand. Speaking of an instance when one such student engaged in a discussion of her own illness in the classroom the lecturer commented 'she was giving more information than I could give' (Hfs1). This lecturer also affirmed the student's contribution by asking her to confirm that her own understanding of the issues was correct. This lecturer saw her recognition of the 'expertise' of the student, as an important aspect of building students' confidence.

There were also other examples of lecturers acknowledging such student expertise. Discussing students with physical disabilities one lecturer maintained that others should not

...be afraid to admit that you don't know what to do and they are more experienced. So use their knowledge to help you deliver. They can tell you what they want and what they can do and you just have to think how you deliver and what to adapt (Sfe2).

After talking about the difficulties experienced in meeting the needs of non-traditional students within large cohorts another lecturer spoke of a strategy he was able to use with the smaller groups he taught

One of the things I always attempt to do is to push my level two and certainly my level three into writing essays that they want to write. So I'll give them broad areas - so if they want to reflect on their own class

background, if they want to reflect on their own ethnic background, the position of females -- whatever they want to do I let them do that [pause] within reason (Smm1)

His disciplinary area (cultural studies in sport) facilitated this approach which he believed enabled non-traditional students to become more engaged. However, he did acknowledge that there were limitations associated with assessment requirements and it had to be ‘within reason’.

7.9 Summary: actions taken in response to greater diversity

Although the greatest volume of activity regarding diversity that was reported in documents was activity related to the admission of non-traditional students there were a number of other activities being undertaken within the university. Academic staff saw some key central services as the main providers of direct support, although this role was questioned by the manager of the disability unit. Support for the development of study skills was frequently requested by academic staff, but there was also some disagreement between academic-related staff regarding the form of such provision. This disagreement revolved around mainstreaming or providing a separate support service. This could have been partly related to different perspectives on the nature of support needs as discussed in section 7.5, and partly related to differences in views on the most effective means of providing academic skills. However academic staff were primarily concerned that there was some additional support, whatever form it took.

Whilst study skills provision was a dominant feature of day-to-day conversation and discussions around widening access a number other actions were revealed in

interviews in academic departments. The majority of these were individualised and involved adapting some aspect of delivery to meet a specific need.

There were a few instances of lecturers favouring what could be termed empowerment strategies in terms of encouraging students to show their 'expertise' and background knowledge but these were limited and there were a number of constraints on the actions that could be taken as will be seen in the next section.

7.10 Challenges and constraints

The difficulty most frequently raised by lecturers as constraining the way they would like to work with a diverse range of students was student numbers. Increased participation and widened participation frequently appeared to be understood as either identical or at least closely linked by both lecturers and managers and therefore the problems of coping with increased numbers were often seen as 'widening participation problems'. Although the move to a mass higher education has had implications for diversity (Yorke, 2001) expansion in itself has some bearing on the experiences of academics purely in terms of volume, and this has been compounded by funding levels not having had a similar rate of increase. This has led to lecturers experiencing a considerable change in demands. The experience of such demands may partly explain the apparent attitude of requiring increased support to cope with students' needs, regardless of the form of such support.

A lecturer from health and care remarked that '...we've huge numbers of students ... in the first year, an amazing amount of students to deal with' (HFm2), whilst a sport lecturer talked about '...lecturing to crowd that wouldn't disgrace a second division football stadium' (SMm1) and the difficulties this presented in terms any individual

attention. Such difficulties were illustrated in the comment that ‘...somebody with a hearing impairment could be sat in lectures with everybody else and could probably go through three years without it being picked up’ (SFs1). Another lecturer, who also complained about class sizes, regretted the limited ability to engage in dialogic approaches, as he stated, ‘I’m not sure you’re going to be able to crack it because once you get beyond maybe 18 or 20 the dynamic changes and you won’t get people offering comments’(SMm2). He saw his most ‘rewarding’ work as being ‘...five minutes after the lecture when the interested ones or the ones who are not sure about something come up and say “Can you explain?”’ (SMm2). He also believed this availability enabled him to be more ‘inclusive’. Although his availability to students was likely to be appreciated, the success of this approach depended on students’ having sufficient self-confidence to make contact and, possibly, the ‘...self certainty of middle-class habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984:66). Another lecturer had commented ‘...it is very reliant on them to come to you,’ and ‘...it takes a maturity to do that’ (SFe1), indicating that the ability to approach lecturers was seen as an attribute only some students possessed.

As already noted the health and care department had some problems reaching its student recruitment targets. Those who worked with larger courses in this department generally expressed the view that inappropriate demands were being made by the university as one said ‘...the thing is we’re under pressure from the university as well to take students, you have to get the course numbers up’ (HFm2). Those on smaller, professionally validated, courses where numbers were capped believed they were ‘protected’ from the demands placed on other colleagues because funding or placement availability restricted the numbers that could be recruited. However, the

manager interviewed believed the lecturers on these courses faced a different set of demands which also constrained their practice.

The problem is that, in a big percentage of our programmes, the curriculum is prescribed for us by professional bodies and by statutory bodies, and we have a limited time period in which to deliver that programme. So any additional demands on academic staff are not particularly well tolerated. In other words they will focus on the delivery. If there are any additional issues or problems as a result of increased diversity or an increase of non-traditional students their response is usually reactive rather than pro-active -because it has to be, because time doesn't allow you to be pro-active. (HM)

It appeared that such time demands and seeming lack of 'room to manoeuvre' resulted in either apathy or frustration on the part of academic staff and consequently a somewhat minimal or reactive engagement with issues related to greater diversity of the student population.

The department with sport related courses had a history of high recruitment and had some of the largest courses in Inter-U. Just like those who taught on larger courses in the health and care department, lecturers found the actual number of students a constraint on practice. Unsurprisingly, given what has already been said, they did not express as much concern about pressure to recruit. Some saw the large class sizes as a problem of the sector rather than the university or their department.

I think we are at the stage now... and again this is talking about the system, not the university and certainly not the [department]... we are at the stage now where we are pushing as many numbers through as we can and hoping to retain as many numbers as we can. (SMm1)

Many lecturers throughout the university spoke of the difficulties of dealing with large classes and the volume of work.

Another aspect of the time constraints experienced was the new expectations of academic staff in relation to both research and enterprise. In particular, all the

corporate policy documents reviewed showed a strategic goal was to gain greater recognition and status in the field of applied research. This goal, combined with an impending application for Research Degree Awarding Powers and an imminent Research Assessment Exercise, resulted in a considerable focus on staff being research active. A number of staff believed that research was the 'way forward' but the current workload, which was seen as being stretched by the demands of non-traditional students, prevented any concerted research activity.

We all worry at the moment about our workloads and about the fact that in certain areas that we're encouraging [pause]. You know [Inter-U] is trying to up its profile in research and trying to encourage lecturers to research in their specific area of expertise and to participate in research. Because let's be honest that's what we should be doing, we should all be doing a certain amount of research to underpin our teaching in one way or the other. And I think you've got such a high workload anyway ...but you've also got more demanding students, so as a result, how on earth are lecturers meant to participate in all these other things which the university's going to have to rely on?(HFm2)

The existence of different demands in post-92 universities leading to dilemmas of prioritisation has been recognised, as Marr (2006:16) states,

The need to become research active presents a dilemma for those in institutions where the majority of funding comes from teaching – teaching and administration take up increasing amounts of time and prevent the level of engagement in research necessary to acquire the reputation which attracts funding.

It was easy to see how the concerns of the lecturer quoted above could develop into resentment of widening participation policy if viewed as partly responsible for preventing involvement in higher status research activity.

Although the size of teaching groups, the time available and conflicting demands were most frequently mentioned as constraints on practice, there was one other issue that revealed itself in conversations with academic staff. This issue related to lecturer's confidence and understanding of possible strategies when dealing with

certain non-traditional students. One lecturer commented on her feelings of insecurity in dealing with some students' problems when she first began lecturing.

...if I go back to when I first started, you'd be faced with these situations. [pause] I come from what I consider a very normal upbringing and I found it very daunting having some students sitting in front of me telling me some horrific experiences that they were going through. And you come out of that thinking well how am I qualified to help them through this? Not necessarily to counsel but to help them and in what ways can we accommodate them? [pause] And it's been purely through experience. (SFe1)

The limited knowledge of potential strategies does not imply there was any lack of concern, or a lack of recognition that some groups of non-traditional students may have different needs within the learning environment. In this case the major issue appeared to be the lecturers own fear of not doing the 'right thing'. However, there was also little appreciation shown of the possible need for alternative learning strategies. Despite some understanding that '...academic culture is not uniformly accessed or experienced' (Read et al., 2003:261) there was limited attention given to the possibility of a need for changes to assessment, course design or teaching. Although nearly all academic staff could talk extensively about the support strategies needed to remedy students' perceived deficiencies there was only little discussion of pedagogical responses to student diversity. Thomas (2002:432) has noted that

Methods of teaching, learning and assessment provide sites for interactions between staff, students and their peers, and with institutional structures, and thus have a central role in both changing and reproducing social and cultural inequalities.

Although the majority of staff interviewed did not talk explicitly about inclusive approaches, and showed some insecurity regarding appropriate strategies, there was a general willingness to be inclusive as shown in previous comments regarding availability to students. There was also evidence of trying to ensure that students from

non-traditional backgrounds were given the opportunity to get to the same level as their peers, although this was sometimes seen as a difficult balance, as shown in the following comment.

We're taking people with all these variety of backgrounds and we're expected to get them into the same basket so to speak. That's one of the things, from a staffing point of view that is so difficult. [pause] You speak to traditional A-level students at the end of the first-year and say to them 'Well have you enjoyed it?' And they say, 'Yes but ...' And you say 'But what?' 'We did it in A-level.'
What they don't seem to appreciate is that we've got these people of different backgrounds coming in to get up to the same skills level.
(HMe2)

As this shows there was a concern for the welfare and attainment of students from underrepresented groups in the sense of 'getting them up to the same level' but actions were constrained by a conceptualization of what was 'normal' in terms of teaching and assessment practices. Read et al. (2003:269) have noted how it is '... possible to talk of a 'culture' of academia, ways of thinking and acting that are institutionally dominant' and that certain practices '...come to be seen as the only or 'natural' way of thinking or acting'. Lecturers in Inter-U talked about the difficulties students experienced with certain practices as if these practices were sacrosanct and the only possible course of action was for the student to adjust. This was particularly the case in relation to assessment practice with examples of student deficit being illustrated by the difficulties they had in writing a '5,000 word essay' or that they had to be 'given ...resits and resits and resits'. Teaching practices showed greater variation, although even here traditional lecturing approaches dominated, largely owing to the aforementioned constraints on lecturers' time and availability and large student numbers.

7.11 Summary: challenges and constraints

Increased student numbers were viewed as a major constraint on academic practice and as preventing lecturers taking more personalised and dialogic approaches. As increased numbers and more demanding students were frequently associated with widening participation there was a danger that widening participation could be 'blamed' for the lack of time available to undertake more prestigious activities, such as research.

In professional programmes there was some feeling of pressure to deliver a prescribed 'commodity' and the possibility of proactively engaging with student diversity was felt to be limited by such pressure. Although there was a general concern shown about the engagement of non-traditional students, activities were constrained by the practical consideration of student numbers, the taken for granted assumptions about teaching and assessment and an under-confidence in knowing how to cope with some of the difficulties faced by students.

7.12 Non-traditional students' perceived integration

The final research question concerned the perceived inclusion of non-traditional students within the student population. A few lecturers showed an initial reluctance to identify non-traditional students as having any different characteristics, arguing that they were not distinguishable in the teaching group. However, most made a clear distinction between traditional and non-traditional students, and even those showing initial reluctance did qualify this when conversations progressed. As already discussed, the nature of the perceived difference between traditional and non-traditional students was dependent upon the local context in which 'non-traditional' was defined.

Some specific instances of non-traditional students being separate from others were provided by lecturers. For example, when discussing international students in the teaching group, a health and care lecturer talked about ‘...the English-speaking side of the room and the non-English-speaking side of the room’ (HF1). She remarked on the difficulty of getting these groups to integrate in the classroom and her colleague commented that she thought this was because they liked to stay ‘...within their comfort zone’ (HF2). The lecturers did not appear to view this as a problem and their discussion was almost light-hearted. Separate groups were seen as a ‘natural’ occurrence, particularly when language issues were also present. The term ‘non-English-speaking’ was clearly meant to indicate students for whom English was their second language and it was interesting that it was implied that the separation was at their instigation, i.e. in order to stay ‘...within their comfort zone’.

A lecturer from sport believed the non-residential status of many non-traditional students set them apart from the rest of the group. He began by saying, ‘One of the things that is starting to concern me is that all the students that now tend to be resident are the ones that have high income’. After explaining that he knew a number of students who couldn’t afford to move away from home he gave the following example.

There's one girl I'm chasing up now from Ynysybwl -- not one of the traditional entrants -- She's on the verge of withdrawing and part of it is because she doesn't feel a part of it because all the rest of her group are resident. She's in and out [pause] second-hand car down from the Bwl. I feel really sorry for her you know. (SM2)

This lecturer and his colleague were both concerned about this apparent injustice and how it could contribute to students withdrawing from university. They talked about trying to help but felt that whatever they did these students ‘...don't get the same sort

of learning experience -and they don't have as much fun - they've got a double whammy' (SMm2).

One of the above lecturers, who was from a working-class background and had entered higher education as a mature student, spoke at length about non-traditional students 'standing out'. He started by explaining that

...it's sometimes difficult even from the very start for people who feel as though they're outside the traditional group which in our case is invariably white middle-class students -sometimes they don't even physically look the same (SMm1).

He later explained his perception of divisions in the groups he taught in the following terms.

There is undoubtedly the feeling of class difference if you like. The majority, [pause] and they are in the majority, are [pause] And I'm not being classist about this [laughs]. They are the sort of young, blonde, beautiful, privileged. And they look like it and they sound like it. And from outside that group... [pause]. Sometimes when I'm doing a lecture I feel as though I'm teaching the Hitler youth. Do you know what I mean? They all look the same they're all young they're all fit. There's nothing essentially wrong with that but if there's somebody from outside that group, even if it's just something simple like the amount of jewellery they wear, or the way they talk, you know they are made to feel outside that group. Regardless of the fact that they... I don't think that anybody deliberately excludes them. I think it is more no common ground and no attempt to bridge that (SMm1).

His perception that middle-class students were in the majority in his groups was probably correct. Popular courses, even in new universities, still recruit their greatest number of students from middle-class backgrounds and it is recognised that the expansion of higher education has generally been of greatest benefit to these students (Reay et al., 2005). An interesting aspect of this statement is the way in which social class appears to be central to his understanding of educational experience. Whilst any notion of a singular 'working class perspective' may be questioned (Morley, 1997),

this lecturer clearly held strong feelings about class divisions in the student population, probably related to his own working-class background which he mentioned several times during the interview. Despite his class awareness, the view he expressed was somewhat similar to that of the lecturers discussing ‘...non-English-speaking’ students in that the separation was seen as almost naturally occurring. It was ‘not deliberate’ but concerned with cultural differences, i.e. ‘no common ground’, although there may have been some reproach implied in the addition that there was ‘no attempt to bridge it’. Later in the conversation, reiterating his view that the mass of students were middle-class, he commented

...the big mass of very, very similar, similar class backgrounds and, as I say, they look the same, they sound the same, they talk the same. Anybody from outside that group is made to feel conspicuously outside that group. It's difficult then for us to grab these people without making them feel even more outside. So I think it's a problem (SMm1).

His acute consciousness of class difference led him to believe any ‘special’ treatment of minority group students would only serve to accentuate their ‘outsider’ status. This view could be seen as being in marked contrast to other opinions encountered during the study which saw it as essential that support, usually separate, was provided in order to manage the diverse needs of the student population.

7.13 Summary: the perceived integration of non-traditional students

Certain students were seen as being separate from their peers for a number of reasons. One reason given was the difference between ‘English-speaking’ and so-called ‘non-English-speaking’ students and the possibility that those for whom English was not their first language felt more comfortable with others in the same situation.

A particular issue raised within the sports department was that some less affluent students continued to live in their parents’ home during their course. It was believed

that this caused them to become increasingly segregated from others who lived on campus or at least in the area local to the University.

Finally one lecturer, from a working-class background, saw working-class students as segregated from the largely middle-class cohorts.

Whilst these issues and all those discussed to this point in the Chapter represent answers to the questions posed in the study a number of areas could be seen as cutting across these questions. Several themes, extrapolated from the issues raised in relation to the specific research questions, will now be considered in the light of previously discussed ideas.

7.14 The study findings: relevance to political and theoretical perspectives

These final points represent a consideration of the relevance of the study's findings to the political justification for widening access and also draw links to those theoretical ideas outlined in Chapter 4.

7.14.1 The economic imperative

As noted a major justification in the political promotion of widening access is the economic need for a skilled workforce. Such economic imperatives were clearly visible and central to both planning and activities within the university. The strategic goal of 'employability' was a prominent feature in all three documents considered. The Corporate Plan stated one aspect of the 'academic business' of the University was '...equipping students with key skills and experiences that are demanded by employers...' (Corporate Plan, 2005-09:4). In this document links between employability and non-traditional students were made in terms of advancing

collaboration with further education colleges which would allow the university to ‘...build capacity in the local economy’. Specific aims also included making ‘...100% of academic programmes ... offer employability modules or provide equivalent provision/experience’ and for departments to ‘...develop appropriate links with employers and professional bodies in order to inform curriculum development’(Corporate Plan, 2005-09:10). One of the three aims of the Learning and Teaching Strategy was focused entirely on employability and saw students being enabled to ‘...contribute fully and effectively to the economy and society’ (Learning and Teaching Strategy 2003-2008: para. 3.0). Collaboration with schools, colleges and business was emphasised in the Widening Access and Participation Strategy which highlighted links to ‘...skills development, skills deficit and requirements and the benefits of inter-sectoral liaison...’. Highlighting the presumed individual and societal benefits of widening access this Strategy made the statement that

For many groups who do not participate in higher education, employment prospects are an important factor in the decision to study and current curricula will be reviewed to meet the needs of a changing employment market. (WAP Strategy, 2002-05:8)

There was thus a discourse in the policy documents of the university that mirrored national policy arguments in presenting exclusion from higher education as economically damaging for both society and excluded individuals.

Discussion of ‘core skills’, ‘employer engagement’, progress files and ‘career planning’ also frequently took place in meetings attended. Individual staff showed a strong awareness of this emphasis on employability and appeared accepting of it. This is not surprising in a post-92 university that has a particular focus on the provision of vocational and professional courses and a similar focus has been observed across the HE sector, particularly in new universities (Morley, 2001).

Within Inter-U the prominence of employability issues, although at times related specifically to non-traditional students, was also seen as fundamental to the university's mission and employability was viewed as relevant to all students at Inter-U. Employability was measured by graduate employment and Boards and Committees received the outcomes of 'first destination surveys' as an indicator of achievement in meeting employability goals. However it can be argued that such measurement overlooks different students' relationship to the employment market. For example, Hurst (1999) has commented on the problems of work experience for disabled students and the difficulties for disabled graduates regardless of their skills. More recently Purcell et al (2007:77) have noted how many mature graduates had to '...display greater determination and resilience to achieve relative labour market success'. Although the workings of the external employment market are a significant factor in the prospects of many non-traditional students this was largely ignored in the discussion and measurement of employability within the university.

7.14.2 Utilitarian, academic and transformative approaches

The emphasis on being receptive to the needs of the economy and a corresponding focus on vocationally oriented programmes indicated that, in terms of Jones and Thomas's (2005:618) policy approaches previously referenced, Inter-U's principal approach was 'utilitarian', confirming their contention that '...there is a tendency towards the utilitarian approach, particularly amongst the new universities'. However, as will be mentioned later, some elements of both the 'academic' and 'transformative' approaches could also be discerned. In addition to the economic focus the correspondence with the utilitarian approach was further evidenced by the central location of the Disability Unit. As they argue in respect of utilitarian influenced higher education '...many student service departments reported institutional

resistance to their integration into core activity' (Jones and Thomas, 2005:618). Whilst 'resistance' is perhaps too strong a word to describe perceptions in Inter-U the contentment with such services being centrally located appeared to derive from academic staff feeling overwhelmed and feeling ill-equipped to deal with such issues. There was therefore a ready acceptance of others having the major responsibility for meeting certain students' needs.

The university also showed the influence of the utilitarian approach in the emphasis placed on pre-entry activity to raise levels of aspiration and compensatory activity to make up for deficit in qualifications, skills and understanding. There were however some qualifying factors related to these activities. Firstly, the focus on pre-entry activity although supporting the notion of aspiration deficiency seemed also to be influenced by the ease of identification of such activity for accountability purposes. Secondly, although some distinct, compensatory provision was made, some lecturers saw this as addressing the needs of the majority of students not just those who were from non-traditional backgrounds. Thus, study support activities, whilst viewed as essential to compensate for students' lack of skills, did not appear to be given much consideration in terms of their potential to 'remedialise' non-traditional students. In a similar fashion to the perception of the role of the Disability Unit, the central provision of study skills appeared to be seen simply as an additional resource to help lecturers manage a multiplicity of demands.

It could be argued that the activities in Inter-U shared some similarity with the 'differential provision' model which Shaw et al. (2007) offered as an adaptation of the utilitarian approach and Layer's 'different product' approach to institutional policy (Layer, 2005:80). Both of these are based on alternative modes of provision

being made available for underrepresented groups. Thus, as Shaw et al. (2007:58) stated regarding this approach,

... the HEI recognises the need to change in order to adapt to the diverse needs of students (unlike the academic discourse), but these changes are not fully integrated throughout the whole of the institution (unlike the transformative discourse).

There was some evidence of such alternative provision designed specifically for non-traditional students. This was such shown in such courses as ‘Foundation degrees’, ‘level zero’ and those that were offered as ‘HE in FE’ but this provision was not extensive and, in any case, the ‘mainstream’ provision was not for traditional students only. Thus, although showing some correspondence with the ‘differential provision’ model, the lack of adaptation throughout the university was more complex than this model implies. This was because, as Shaw et al (2007:43) also noted, HEIs are multifaceted and ‘...schools and departments may approach WP in very different ways and construct different business cases to justify this’.

As stated, in addition to elements of the utilitarian approach, some aspects of both the academic and transformative approaches could also be identified. The academic approach again privileges aspiration raising activities and the supply of information about higher education opportunities, both of which take place outside the university. This showed itself in the majority of the work of the central access team and their location within the recruitment and marketing department. Some transformative aspects were also revealed. The ideal version of the transformative approach was seen by Jones and Thomas (2005:619) as being very unusual in HE and as ‘...related to the progressive thinking around adult education and the more radical precepts of the access movement’. Although not showing the institution wide coverage stressed by Jones and Thomas some pockets of activity could be seen as manifesting

transformative qualities. This was most evident when individual lecturers spoke of their attempts to provide a platform for non-traditional students to contribute and utilise knowledge most relevant to them within their courses. It was also evident in acknowledgements of the importance of life and professional experience as well as academic skills. In addition to the specific instances of certain lecturers valuing the experience of non-traditional students there were occasional references to the cultural benefits of having a wide range of international students. However this was seen as somewhat limited within the classroom context when lecturers spoke of the difficulty of getting groups to move out of what was viewed as their 'comfort zone'. There may be room for development in this area given the positive potential of diverse student populations.

7.14.3 Assimilation

Despite some instances of transformative and potentially empowering activity, the study found that those arguments concerned with accommodating non-traditional students within courses were far more prevalent than those promoting diversity as benefiting all students. Nevertheless, the 'accommodations' made, although not necessarily transformative in the terms used by Jones and Thomas, did show that most lecturers were, at one level, aware of the different circumstances of non-traditional students and made efforts to respond to their needs. Parker et al's (2005) notion of the official and unofficial curriculum seems relevant to such responses to the needs of non-traditional students that were found in the study. Essentially this argument maintains that practitioners routinely make the curriculum more accessible, and this is largely based on individual goodwill. The individual adjustments to delivery that lecturers made seemed to be of this kind. Lecturers appeared to be routinely involved in 'finding a way around' the stated curriculum or in work outside

the lecture. Thus, a simple understanding of the institution as requiring the assimilation of non-traditional students to a pre-defined system was by no means the whole picture. Although non-traditional students were generally being required to assimilate to a system of higher education that values particular academic forms and outcomes, and, as a consequence, were being required to be brought ‘up to standard’ (Sayed, 2002:8-9) more flexible and accommodating means of enabling students were also being enacted by lecturers on a daily basis.

7.14.4 Diversity management

In addition to ideas of assimilation the notion of diversity management, as a means of integrating the minority groups, was mentioned in Chapter 4. Aspects of diversity management approaches could be recognized in terms of there being an imperative for some courses to attract and retain students from a more diverse pool. This approach to making a ‘business case’ for widening participation has been reflected in recent literature on the motivation to widen access. Thus Shaw et al. (2007:3) have written about widening participation and

The concept of a business case for diversity... built on recognising a distinction between an externally driven ‘equal opportunities paradigm’ and a ‘diversity paradigm’ that recognises business benefits as well as moral and ethical arguments

This was particularly relevant in those courses that had recruitment difficulties. In these courses it could be argued that non-traditional students were seen as ‘...making up for poor recruitment of “traditional” students’ (Powney, 2002:25). However, where this was the case, non-traditional students tended to be identified principally by their lack of formal qualifications, leading to a conception of non-traditional students as those ‘...not making the grade’. The ‘business case’ could also be seen as relevant to those courses where recruitment was buoyant. In this study the sports department felt no pressure to seek alternative markets to the traditional despite institutionally

stated aims. The ability to recruit to target against a backdrop of restricted admissions provided little demand to look beyond traditional markets. Although there was little evidence of staff within the department being averse to the widening participation agenda this relative lack of pressure to recruit led to some staff outside the department perceiving it as less welcoming.

7.14.5 Empowerment

As previously stated another concept, frequently employed in the analysis of the contexts in which minority groups find themselves, is empowerment. Empowering students in terms of developing skills and knowledge in order to enhance employability was highlighted in corporate documents and illustrated by the profile given to progress files, work experience and the professional accreditation of courses. This career improvement version of empowerment stresses the acquisition of skills and qualifications, which is undoubtedly important for many non-traditional students but, as mentioned earlier in this section, this form of empowerment is limited by the external employment market. 'Student centred learning' is also sometimes interpreted as a form of empowerment. The active participation in, rather than passive receipt of, learning advocated by adherents is argued to be both more effective as a learning process and to provide students with a range of transferable skills valued by employers (Clouston, 2005). However, it was found that the need to manage the pressures of higher student numbers was also a powerful incentive acting to promote more independent forms of learning. Furthermore, non-traditional students may find the development of autonomous learning difficult through a lack of self-confidence and less familiarity with the requirements of the 'academy'. In short, their lack of cultural capital may put them at a disadvantage. To some extent this did appear to be recognised by some academic staff in demands for increased learning support for

students and an acknowledgement that some students lacked the ‘tools of the trade’. Finally, a more radical conception of empowerment was, as stated, found in some instances where lecturers embraced diversity and saw the potential contribution of non-traditional students’ experience.

7.14.6 Habitus

The inappropriateness of making categorical statements regarding the institution as a whole stems from the different demands and influences operating on departments and individuals. Greenbank (2007:219) in research on the implementation of widening participation policy, noted that HEIs are complex organisations

...that have within them groups of people (in departments, within departments and in other activity systems) that have developed distinct sub-cultures. Individuals also have their own values that have developed from their membership of these subcultures and from the other environments or social locations which currently shape their values, or in the past have influenced them.

Greenbank’s study showed that policy documents and the statements of senior managers often failed to convey this complexity owing to their perception of a corporate culture. However, in this current study such complexity was evident in the different conceptions of, and orientations to, non-traditional students. One aspect of this was the way in which different lecturers constructed non-traditional students and their needs. This could be explained in terms of the ‘meaning-giving perceptions’ (Bourdieu, 1979:170) generated by habitus which determines “...how people construct the world and are constructed by it” (Kenway and McLeod, 2004:532).

The construction of non-traditional students was clearly influenced by the objective structural location of different groups of academic staff but there was also an indication that personal histories interacted with this. Although an investigation of the

biographies of staff was beyond the scope of this study one interviewee announced that he had been a non-traditional student by virtue of his socio-economic background and maturity when first accessing post-compulsory education. This lecturer was passionate about providing opportunities for non-traditional students to use their experience, and to validate that experience, within the course. He thus encouraged them to 'reflect on their own class background' and other aspects of their identity in their coursework. He also recognised a hierarchy in terms of cultural signs and symbols when he spoke of the majority of 'middle-class' students who 'look the same', 'sound the same', and 'talk the same', and his belief that any individual '...from outside that group is made to feel conspicuously outside that group...'. This could be seen as recognition that cultural capital was necessary to 'fit' within the higher education context. He also appeared to have a heightened awareness that singling out non-traditional students for specific attention had the potential to further separate them from their peers. Whilst this disposition influenced his general approach and perception he also expressed some of the principles associated with the location of a lecturer in higher education, particular in relation to assessment practices and the need for students to be able to write 'a 5000 word essay'.

The general orientation of this lecturer contrasted with some comments of other lecturers regarding the deficiencies of non-traditional students when compared with traditional students and the need for separate provision. This particular perception did not appear to stem from some middle-class conspiracy against non-traditional students but rather from a disposition that saw different forms of behaviour as more understandable. Thus, 'traditional students' failed for different reasons, such as 'taking the wrong degree', or they 'don't want to do it' or they 'spend too much time drinking'. Whilst this may have been unacceptable it did not appear to warrant any

separate provision. The lecturer who referred to these gave the impression that ‘we all know’ of such reasons. Even a lecturer who appeared to show a genuine concern for the difficulties faced by non-traditional students was ‘daunted’ by students experiencing problems beyond the understanding of someone with a ‘normal upbringing’. Such orientations may combine with structural conditions of increased student numbers and multiple demands to provide an environment in which non-traditional students are problematized (Bowl, 2001).

As indicated despite some differences in individual lecturers’ orientations there were certain assumptions about academic behaviour that were more consistent. Particular assumption tended to revolve around assessment practices and the conventions and standards of academic writing. As stated the lecturer who had himself been a non-traditional student still asserted the importance of ‘essay writing’ and that encouraging students to write about their own experience should be ‘within reason’. It may be that such immutable aspects of the ‘institutional habitus’ influenced lecturers’ anxiety about dyslexia, given that ‘...dyslexic students pose particular challenges to the idea of absolute standards in higher education (Riddell and Weedon, 2006:58).

The usefulness of the concept of habitus in understanding ‘...individuals as a complex amalgam of their past and present’ (Reay 1998:521) has been asserted in relation to the experience of non-traditional students. The above discussion and findings of this study seem to suggest that it may also be usefully employed in further investigations of the way in which the personal history of lecturers, interacting with institutional structures and demands, can influence the provision of higher education to non-traditional students.

8: Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Main findings

This exploratory study of the conceptions of non-traditional students and widening participation operating within a new university found a number of different constructions of the non-traditional student which, in practice, were largely related to local circumstance. Historically the level of ambiguity found in policy statements may have provided the opportunity for such variability. Whilst recent policy directives and target setting seemed to provide a more focussed, if narrowly metric based and externally driven, approach this was not necessarily familiar to academic staff within departments. Their experience of widening access led to different interpretations.

These interpretations were influenced by particular ‘business-case’ issues such as recruitment. Where difficulties in recruitment were found non-traditional students were frequently seen as those students who were less qualified, deficient in academic skills and needing significant support. When combined with other pressures this perception of non-traditional students could potentially translate into the negative student experiences noted by Bowl (2001; 2003). However, the ‘tutor indifference’ experienced by Bowl’s students was not indicated and in many cases great concern was expressed.

Other constructions of the non-traditional student were also revealed. In particular mature students were seen in a positive light. This was not necessarily due to their being seen as less instrumental, as in Reay’s (2003) study of mature working class students, but because they were seen as able to make an effective contribution to

learning, thus supporting lecturers in the teaching situation and, possibly, allowing them to take a dialogic approach. The greatest controversy and confusion was shown in attitudes toward supporting students with dyslexia and the uncertainty expressed in relation to this area confirms previous work by Kerr (2001).

Increased support for students to acquire academic skills and to meet other non-academic needs was generally seen as necessary although conflicting views were expressed. Some saw support as necessary, but largely ineffective due to students' inadequacy. Others believed such support compensated for non-traditional students' previous lack of experience, and a final view was that a majority of students needed academic support owing to a general lack of preparedness for university level study. There were also differences of opinion as to whether this support should be a separate provision, although there was some indication that academic staff welcomed the central provision of support owing to increased demands being made on their time. Thus, in common with Johnson and Deem (2003) and Chandler et al. (2002), the study found academic staff subject to contradictory pressures and that these pressures could influence their approach to diversity and attitude to support.

The strategic emphasis on access initiatives and, corresponding, relative lack of emphasis on the implications of diversity for learning and support activity may have contributed to there being less evidence of proactive curricula reform and more individualised responses to diversity. However, other structural factors such as increased student numbers, time pressures and the feeling of courses being prescribed were also significant. Some uncertainty and under-confidence regarding developmental strategies and a related reluctance to move away from familiar academic approaches may also have played a part. Also, it was not the case that no

change was occurring. Some changes were evidenced in relation to skills acquisition and 'learning recognition' reflecting the consistent economic orientation found in both policy statements and staff perceptions.

This economic orientation could be seen as providing opportunities for non-traditional students to gain credentials and cultural capital. In this respect it could be seen as potentially empowering if a career improvement notion of empowerment is accepted. The suggestion of a more radical approach to empowerment was evident in some lecturers' attempts to draw on the experiences of non-traditional students.

Finally the study findings suggest that there may be further scope for understanding the strategies utilised by academic staff by employing the concepts of habitus and institutional habitus. This could usefully build on those studies which have used these concepts to analyse the experience of non-traditional students.

8.2 Delimitations of the study

As this study was undertaken in order to explore general conceptions it did not seek to determine specific practices with previously defined minority student groups unless these were raised within documents or by university staff (as in the case of dyslexia). The need to uncover those groups identified within the university as non-traditional prevented a more specific investigation of practices with particular groups. Some studies of this nature have been undertaken, particularly in relation to disability (Tinklin and Hall, 1999; Riddell et al., 2005) and from the students' perspective.

Neither was there any attempt made within the study to seek the views of non-traditional students themselves. Rather, the study was seen as complementary to the literature already available in this area.

8.3 Recommendations for further research

Completion of this exploratory study indicated potential for extension of the study and a number of areas which merit further investigation.

8.3.1 Repeat studies

Although exact replication is problematic the findings could be usefully considered by investigation of conceptions of widening access and non-traditional students in other post-92 settings in order to ascertain the strength of findings. In addition it could be revealing to undertake the investigation in a pre-92 university to explore the influence of contextual differences.

8.3.2 Changes in representation

In the time period of the study some changes were made in the representation of non-traditional students in strategic documentation. A longitudinal study of representation in documentation could provide an insight into the changing demands made of universities and their impact upon the way in which non-traditional students are defined.

8.3.3 Empowering practices

A more detailed investigation of specific learning and teaching practices which have an empowerment focus, together with an analysis of their impact could provide guidance for future development.

8.3.4 Origins of staff perceptions

Finally, further investigations required regarding the origins of staff perceptions of non-traditional students and the influence of the current context of practice and individual dispositions.

8.4 Recommendations for practice

In the context of a professional doctorate an equally, if not more important set of recommendations are concerned with practice. The following recommendations for practice are not meant to be exhaustive but are made on their ability to be implemented and have an impact in the short-term. Whilst it would be possible to make broader recommendations, for example related to higher education resources, it is believed that these implications are evident from the previous discussion and are less directly amenable to practitioner influence.

8.4.1 Identification of specific need

The collapsing of distinct categories in corporate level discussions of widening participation is insufficiently sensitive to the potentially divergent needs of different student groups. More explicit identification of specific need is required in both policy and practice. A rigorous analysis of such needs may also serve to focus attention on the ‘throughput’ aspects of widening participation as opposed to the more easily measurable ‘input’ and ‘output’ aspects (Skelton, 2002). Services designed to meet such needs should be both integrated into courses and activities and differentiated in terms of the specific requirements of particular groups.

8.4.2 Staff development to promote inclusion

Training programmes utilising the literature on non-traditional students own experiences could provide greater awareness of the different social, cultural and academic backgrounds of students and the importance of sensitive and supportive teaching practices. It may also help clarify the meaning of widening participation. There is a requirement for the further support and guidance for academic staff to develop learning and teaching strategies that encourage inclusion and build confidence. The sharing of positive examples of such strategies is also necessary.

8.4.3 Greater value placed on activities supporting diversity

Developmental activities related to inclusive teaching need to be complemented by recognition and reward for good practice in order that academic staff are not compromised by demands to undertake activities that seem more highly valued.

8.4.4 Specific awareness training in the area of dyslexia

The study revealed a need for greater understanding of dyslexia. Staff need to be confident about the assessment of dyslexia and aware of the impact it can have on individual student achievement. They also need to critically examine traditional assessment assumptions and to receive further training in the development of alternative but equivalent assessment strategies.

8.4.5 Collaborative learning strategies

Consideration needs to be given to the difficulties faced by 'non resident' students and those with limited financial resources, particularly in terms of their potential exclusion. The further development of collaborative learning and the provision of social spaces for student interaction may make a contribution to addressing such

issues. The promotion of social learning, interdependence and collaboration may also balance the emphasis placed on autonomous learning when this may be compromised by students' lack of confidence.

8.5 Final comment

A recent review of widening participation research commented that:

Having a diverse student population could be of educational and social benefit to teaching and learning in higher education. Having a variety of educational, cultural, religious and family backgrounds can enrich the learning experience. The different perspectives and experiences students from different backgrounds bring to the learning context can be utilised to promote learning and teaching. (Gorard et al. 2006:115)

This vision will not be realized unless this positive potential is fully recognized. The association of widening participation with recruitment difficulties, large classes and a need for greater support will not help to promote a view of widening participation and non-traditional students that recognizes the contribution that diversity can make within the university.

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